



# Feral Flaw

By

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Dedication

To my sister who would probably love being abducted by aliens, that is those with an Irish accent!

## Chapter One

Destiny viewed a man's merit as whatever he deemed right and just, but who could triage rationally with his starship's walls caving in around him? Commander Goro shoved the cacophony of his crew members' telepathic pleas colliding inside his head from his conscious mind and plowed down *The Seeker's* sterile white corridor toward The Chamber where his chosen mate *had better be waiting*.

Would others view a starship commander saving his crazed earthling over his crew as the best of choices given the ship was on fire and the verge of explosion? But she was a lesser-evolved humanoid incapable of hearing the chaotic mindspeak aboard my dying starship, he thought. Nor had she a clue how to survive any place other than earth.

She needs me.

And I owe her more than the rest of the crew because I brought her here and she's my love-sworn mate. More than the mere fact I hold the kind gentle earth woman in my heart above all else. Without her, my detection methods to reveal spies would have relied solely upon breaking free-thinking law. And without Darla, the second child of legend would never be born. Darla's existence has kept my actions true to The Cause.

The dissonance of fleeting word bits crashing into complete words dug deeper into his thoughts like burrowing worms, infesting and painfully invading my mind.

"*I'm bleeding*," a crew member clearly blurted in mindspeak through the disharmony of voices. "*I'm pinned against the aft wall in the biosphere.*"

Sending someone down to help the crew member was a waste of time. Any moment, the fires contained in the nursery and the helm would set off a mega explosion. *The Seeker* would become a memory to all freedom fighters in the universe's eighteen quadrants.

Ashes to ashes... Just what Voldon wanted. The end to a battleship that constantly countered all of the bastard emperor's murderous soul-less strategies. First he focused on nurseries to kill children who might grow into the children of legend. Then, he turned his mercenaries onto my starship. Whether it was to kill me or to capture Darla, Voldon's last stratagem failed with the looming explosion. Voldon was on the verge of killing the woman he desired to possess. Such mindless dogmatism resonated self-destruction. But the animal just kept coming like a feral beast.

How does one kill such a creature?

By honoring legend. Somewhere, somehow, Destiny would reveal Voldon's flaw other than simply his controlling the minds of other psychic beings. One would think his being blind to truth suicidal, enough to kill the bastard. Or am I only lying to myself? I have countered Voldon's every move he made to reign supreme over the universe. I even seduced the earth woman he targeted for abduction three years ago. Not that the gentle woman I fell in love with required much to earn her love or wasn't desirable enough to love.

Darla hadn't been hardened by the Blood Wars. She had hopes and dreams that spread beyond simple survival and freedom of thought and reminded me often of the joys in life free thinkers had no time to remember. But I introduced her to life beyond earth, sucked her into the universal reality of psychic war. And now the heart of my heart could die because of my actions.

Am I any better than Voldon?

Do I harbor the feral flaw?

How could I when Darla and I freely share our love? Ours is pure emotion, unconsummated. Unadulterated by the addictive blood lust of mated were-assassins. She *loves* me. Why else would she feign insanity and help me flush traitors from my crew?

Another presence shoved others aside inside my head. "*Can you hear me, Sukhaw? My last wish is to know you've escaped.*"

A dutiful crew deserved more than abandonment when drawing their final breaths.

My starship.

My command.

To aid and assist is to sentence Darla and all free thinkers to psychic enslavement. She is The Cause's only means to defeat Voldon. I must fulfill the legend and sire a child with my mate.

Complete my duty. I leaned into my stride, ground another accursed step of metal floor beneath the heel of my mercenary boot, and ran toward The Chamber.

\* \* \* \*

The starship quaked beneath Darla's knee-high black leather boots where she stood on the clean metal floor in The Chamber's forested entrance. She knew something was going down. Something terribly disturbing by the odd wayward sounds echoing off the starship's always silent and barren walls, she thought. Since all I ever really heard was the circulating air through the ventilation system, something was damned sure wrong.

But Goro had things under control. Right? The universe's hottest bad ass always did. And he made me promise to hide out here. That was part of the game to outwit Voldon. But something felt terribly wrong. I nervously slid my palms over reassuring slick hilts of the knives jutting from the tall shafts of my boots, up to the others concealed inside the warm soft leather of my snug mercenary attire.

I'm armed. Even mentally with my telekinesis.

What happens if nobody comes?

Well, Goro wouldn't just leave me standing here. No. He'd come for me. His blood burned for mine as hot as mine did for his.

Oh to share blood with him at long last. When would he submit to legend and let Destiny have her way with us? If they didn't get to work, they might never have the child of legend. Who, then, would end Voldon's tyranny?

The door edged open.

Not the normal smooth sliding action with a swoosh. Something was definitely wrong with the starship.

Goro's muscular body thrust through the doorway, straddling the threshold, shoving the hatch open, propping the unruly sheet of silver metal back with the wedge of his muscled mass. His serious alien orange gaze locked upon mine. "Run."

Not good. I stretched my legs and jammed my body into the space created between his hard somewhat giving frame and the unwavering doorframe.

Pressure trapped me against my mate's hard body.

Stuck. Damn smashed breasts. "What's happening?" I pushed his solid broad back toward the wall he almost hugged and wriggled in an attempt to free my pinned body.

He gasped in profile. "Any moment *The Seeker* will explode thanks to Voldon. I must get you off this ship. Now." He grunted and jammed a boot back between my legs, braced

against the doorframe, and groaned, sliding the hatch.

Boy, he sounded like he was having sex. Not exactly how I pictured us deep in the blood lust he promised at every turn. This wasn't a good time to tease me with promises. But a chivalrous act was a chivalrous act to remember. Even if the guy was a Goth commander.

His body gave just a smidge.

Enough to allow wiggle room. Not for my hips.

A tall gangly crewman slid to a halt in the passageway and scanned our predicament.

Ass. He probably thought I tried to kill Goro. Like I killed anyone in pretending to side with questionable new inductees. A little blood-letting really didn't hurt anyone.

Oh to hear their telepathic thoughts. I bet Goro talked a mile a minute in mindspeak... But time was a-wasting. "Can you lend me a hand?" I groaned at the crewman.

The crewman snaked his fingers around my elbow and pulled.

Hallelujah. Just enough to get my body moving. I grabbed Goro's shoulder and squeezed free of the pressure, into the corridor.

The crewman stepped rearward and scanned me from head to toe.

Was that an assessment or could he overpower a telekinetic woman wielding knives? By the distrust on his face, the guy probably wished he wore mercenary black instead of the standard white operations' attire. Something to make himself look a bit more intimidating. But with the bloody splatters of red gracing his shirt and pants, he looked pretty damned invincible.

A force shoved me toward the sterile docking bay.

"Run," Goro commanded.

Trying to keep up with someone raised in space was almost impossible. Gravity was so encumbering on Earth and affected a body raised under that smothering atmosphere. That baggage from childhood carried over into space life when sprinting with extraterrestrials. But nothing would interfere with my following the magnanimous starship's commander. Or was devout a better word for the renowned promoter of free thinking? I stretched my stride to keep up with Goro.

He never turned to see if I managed to avoid his whipping knee-length leather coat and the blunt heels of his boots. He just ran like our lives were at risk.

Right through the gaping docking bay door.

Since the enormous cavern still had an atmosphere, none of the pod fighters could have launched yet. Or the obviously jammed external doorway would also be gaping. Deep space would have long since sucked every mercenary into lifeless oblivion. So the other psychic were-assassins awaited their commander's arrival.

Not me, the crazed Earth girl.

They undoubtedly waited for Goro.

Was I really that great of an actress? None of them could know Goro and I played them all. Or Voldon might realize the part he served in Goro's game. And oh how Goro loved to work people to The Cause's advantage.

What kind of terrible thing drove Goro to abandon ship? An uncontrollable fire? But Goro wouldn't allow his pilots to die in an explosion. He'd be too busy trying to save as many were-assassins as possible to counter the attack of Voldon's forces. Without the shape shifting perks of those mercenaries, The Cause would have dwindled centuries ago. So everyone waited for the word to launch.

Hopefully sealed inside their pod fighters. They should clear a fire blast that way when getting sucked into deep space. After all, Goro had always told me to hide in my pod fighter.

The machine would protect me.

Goro's ringing footsteps stamped out a beat around the pointed noses of a few seamless pod fighters where they waited like a militia, poised to depart for battle.

Or a line of huge whacky shaped condiment bottles resting on their sides.

Goro turned, grabbed my forearm, and wrenched me off my feet. The overhead lighting blurred into a smear of rafters and shadow until I landed squarely and firmly upon my bottom. Seated on a solid surface.

"Lie down, Darla."

The universe stilled.

Goro's shaved head hovered above the pod-fighter's cockpit.

What an unyielding and calm mask he wore, undoubtedly the only one that worked to instigate his preferred reaction when avoiding conveying the emergency's details he had yet to disclose. Just what was the freaking plan? Did he even have time to explain? With only room for one inside my cockpit, debriefing seemed a distant luxury.

"They're going to blast the exterior hatch. When it blows, I'll keep up with you. Just keep going. Communication between pod fighters is nigh impossible. But I'll be with you." He turned to his pod fighter.

Where in the Hell am I to go?

And how in the Hell am I supposed to survive to get there?

Now wasn't the time for questions when facing a long dark ride. A fire ball was coming. Or something equally bad.

Time to follow the sexy guy making rules. The one with the firm ass and slightly bowed legs. And when was I going to run into another extremely intelligent humanoid male again? Like that was even a possibility after falling for Goro's intelligent pontifications and getting lured off the only place in the universe I know. I thrust my boots into the dark recesses of my space vessel as my intended sank into his own pilot's seat in the craft next door.

He shot me a wink. "When it's safe, I'll have you follow my lead."

Safe? Shit, *safe* wasn't even possible in a foreign world where people could read minds, suck a sentient being's blood to gain absolute control over it, and hunt you down to give birth to their children of legend.

"Password please?" my fighter's computer demanded.

"Giggle bunny." Only the formal and commanding Goro would think of that ridiculous password. It was definitely a good one nobody would guess.

The hatch shifted, choking out the light overhead.

Into the darkness of deep space.

Talk about rebirth. Daddy's Bible thumping would have finally dreamed up this as Hell froze over.

\* \* \* \*

The pod fighters shot into the blackness of space around Goro's fighter craft and drew up short. Into chaos, he snarled. Life pods idled everywhere on the radar screen. Pods loaded with my crew like a spray of molecules from *The Seeker's* last desperate breaths.

My ship slammed my boots into the nose of my pod fighter with one strong forward thrust.

Momentum.

*The Seeker* had exploded.

Ashes to ashes, old girl. I respectfully touched my brow in the traditional Xquine manner

of my home world.

Now to embrace the unknown. "Computer, locate Darla's pod fighter."

"Darla's craft is on your starboard side."

"I want to be inside her pod fighter. Stay with her."

My fighter veered right.

Thank goodness for computers. Pod fighters were virtually impossible to differentiate between given their plain exterior façade and window-less features. The plus was that nobody could gaze into your fighter and identify you. However, the pilot floated through space in muted blackness lit only by a soft orange glow where buttons illuminated a panel. Virtually undetectable.

Thank the blessed stars for a computer to locate Darla's biorhythms in the sea of bobbing starship debris. Pod fighters could keep up with other pod fighters. But Voldon wouldn't have that luxury. So Voldon couldn't just swoop in and pick off every crewman one by one. Or he'd take out his treasured Darla.

What idiocy possessed Voldon to attack and risk the female earthling's life the moron so hungered to possess? Why his latest strategy to destroy Darla's transport? With but months left until Earth's winter solstice 2012 he should be focused on finding the crystal Bramyllion skulls he desperately hunted, those last few relics claimed to be hidden on Earth. Voldon's giving up on the collective power of the thirteen crystal skulls was a sign of something.

Until today's disaster. The idiot suddenly homed in on Darla.

The only way to protect Darla now was to hide her. Find the opportune moment we can bind our souls together in sacred mercenary fashion. Find a safe place to raise our soul child, the child of legend. As Destiny promised. To do so meant escaping. Hiding. Waiting for a chance to get back at Voldon. Time. We just need enough time to bring the child of legend to life and win the ultimate power game. The game I seem to be losing at the moment.

One side would win.

The honorable side. Faith would see me on the side of justice.

Faith.

What hid within that concept of loyalty, dedication, and devotion? Disaster for the soul. Perspective. Pure legitimization. A crutch to measure a man as sufficient. Faith, the burden of all souls. A curse. Especially when everywhere a man turned a dictating bastard lurked trying to harvest your thoughts in the Blood Wars. And in the end, who truly won? The man who reasoned he could think for himself like Voldon or the man who followed blind faith to save others like a commander? Was following Destiny any better?

Thinking about it never provided a clear answer.

Either way I'm enslaved, by Destiny.

No true revelation existed otherwise when a commander lived each moment making life-threatening decisions for his friends and comrades. Destiny should pity a faithful soul and reveal which path was the wisest with my starship's cosmic dust. Just a few stepping stones to peace among the stars would do. Darla still stood along those ephemeral steps.

Waiting.

Demanding the binding.

Voldon could never have her though. At some level, the mating had already occurred. The bond was deeper than just sex and blood. The bond was heart and soul.

"Commander, a *Mawshwuc* destroyer just materialized aft of *The Seeker's* location," the computer announced.



Welcome to the godforsaken Blood Wars.

## Chapter Two

*Curse Voldon.* Goro ground his teeth and choked back a snarl. “Relay survival message *Code Disaster* to all of The Cause’s spacecraft.” Hopefully, Voldon’s forces won’t locate Darla’s or my fighter in the process, he thought. Or I’ll be lucky to save what was salvageable and regroup my forces. That is if a rational person called ordering all escape pods to scatter could lead to salvage more than a final command.

The radar screen’s border flickered in red with the word disaster along the upper edge.  
Peace unto you, my friends.

“Your crew has been notified,” the computer reported.

My gut sank with the announcement.

Why did everything seem so final? Was this the end? Had Voldon defeated Estal Goro, second son of a simple farmer, sole survivor of the decimated planet Xquine? Certainly Destiny didn’t intend on this being the moment Xquine’s colorful history faded into nothing but legend. I had to hold my crew together.

Restructure.

Retaliate.

The pod fighter eased forward ushered by a gentle nudge of momentum.

The crew would scramble as was standard in such situations in order to create confusion for the opposition. Even Darla who had rattled off the steps for an evacuation drill knew what to do.

Everybody probably hoped my little actress was accidentally left behind to die in the chaos. But a free thinker would never truly know she feigned insanity given her lesser-evolved mind was impenetrable. Even if I could project into her mind, a fool dared venture into curtained corners of another psychic’s thoughts without permission. Talk about sacrilege. But if I could know Darla that intimately, I damned sure would. Something almost dangerous enchanted me with the simple psychic female from Earth. What? Maybe the fact I *couldn’t* read her.

She *was* danger.

My dangerous secret weapon against Voldon. My advantage over the bastard. Bait. My key to staring into the eyes of unrestricted boundaries, pure irrationality, and walking away with the score settled for decimated planets, genocide, and conversion of populations into thought-less zombies. Darla is the face of fear. And only a foolish warrior cowered in fear’s shadow. Bless Devros fear loved in return. “Stay with Darla’s pod fighter, computer.”

“Darla’s pod fighter is aft, commander.”

A strong burst of energy forced my fighter to ram my body against the pod’s hard starboard interior where most of my body lay buried from view, deep in darkness.

So much for shadows being mass-less. “Is there a problem, computer?”

“The *Mawshwuc* ship is firing on our survivors, commander.”

As if my aching elbow didn’t express those same disturbing details. But my powers are limited to telepathy like most higher-evolved psychics, not reading pain.

The ship yawed again.

“Matching Darla’s movements, commander.”

Another round of the grand dance of soul-mate survival within the eerie quiet of the telepathic world of psychics. How strange that we die in peaceful silence. Alone. When it was so easy to listen to everyone passing by aboard the ship. But the cries for help silenced as everyone struggled to stay afloat now. Nobody had time to struggle to keep their link to the communication line open. And not listening might be a commander’s safest strategy.

Radar blips moved chaotically on the radar panel.

Beacons indicating how each vessel’s occupants fought for one last heartbeat. One more chance at life. Or a desperate plea for help.

The game of Blood War.

Wave after wave of energy smacked my body back and forth inside the small dark space where I impatiently reclined.

How many crew members died in this abysmal attack on unarmed escape pods?

Disgust mixed with guilt clenched my gut.

*Ashes to ashes. From dusk to dust. Never to live, love, and laugh. Love and light, my friends.* They deserved more than a silent prayer. At least their ashes now floated among the stars. No *Mawshwuc* could desecrate that free-thinking funerary practice. Free thinkers had the final laugh with that point.

My gut jittered like someone filled it with Earth’s favored placating beverage, coffee grounds.

Guilt.

If only The Cause had enough pod fighters for each crew member, then guilt wouldn’t threaten to haunt as each radar blip teased of lost life. But the luxury of self defense through camouflage and maneuverability were reserved for only were-assassin couples, those who could shape shift into an animal form with minds that couldn’t be penetrated by higher-evolved psychics.

How ironic the silent unyielding seconds ticked by as radar blips.

Like illuminating fireflies on the hunt for sustenance. And nearby flew a handful of psychic mercenaries tucked safely inside indestructible spacecraft. So much for helping comrades. And The Cause spoke of great fortune since the discovery of these alien pod fighters crafted by extinct beings lost to time. If the majority of them ever flew in my situation, inside a pod fighter, their opinions would quickly change. I snorted.

Curses come to mind.

For the triumph of discovery.

For the yearning of a soul mate.

For the inability to help anyone.

Death would snuff those erratic radar heartbeats. One by one. And who would be the hero? Not a man who hid inside protective armor while lives left in his care were sacrificed for his survival. Alas, any leader who drank often from the pool of guilt committed suicide. Now was not the time to shudder and cringe. Now was the time to get the better of Voldon.

\* \* \* \*

Planet Vek’s violet atmosphere swirled on Goro’s pod-fighter’s view screen like a storm pounded at what he remembered was the largest of the planet’s three continents. Nothing but plants and animals thrived within the continent’s enormous stretch of tropical vegetation crisscrossed and rimmed with mountains. Not one humanoid.

A safe haven? Perhaps. Time to conceal Darla among the trees until I knew I completely

evaded Voldon's forces. The vegetation just might be our salvation. But if any of Voldon's scouts had followed *The Seeker's* survivors, Vek would prove anything but a safe haven. "Let's find a place to stretch my cramping legs, computer."

The pod fighter veered into the planet's upper clouds.

Down into the unknown wild beauty of a purple monster promising passion's love and lust in its heightened level of seductive redness... To deal with more temptation in the form of a sweet caring female from Earth. *The heart of my heart.*

Few women aboard a starship thought of little more than death and survival. Who would with endless the waves of war bombarding into *The Seeker*? But Darla's humor and spunk had helped me forget the war for a few moments. Tempted me to give into lust and quit the game. Was stopping on Vek dangerous?

To turn back from the reality meant to run from fear.

An Xquine warrior faced fear.

Unfortunately, the way she begged for unification these days meant abstinence would be nearly impossible. Or torture. But Darla was safer a virgin free of incriminating blood lust. The symptoms of blood lust gave away a person who fought for The Cause. Voldon would never know she was part of the free-thinking movement if she hadn't mated. So, celibacy was crucial to her protection.

Celibacy ultimately helped one prove oneself to Destiny. Regardless of how painful the process was.

The clouds gave way to a never-ending expanse of leafy canopies.

Nature in its glorious state of uncontrollable defiance.

No man could beat nature without cruelly destroying the essence of existence. But that was what life for a humanoid was all about. Balancing reality of the natural order with the unnatural narcissistic reason buried inside each and every individual. Yet, down there, beneath the jungle, awaited an even wilder fight. A battle beyond simple nature verses nurture with the individual. A battle of wills between two people chosen to unite for the greater good. Darla would want to end their celibacy.

Oh to give into the lust.

My thoughts drift too often to blood lust.

Simply lust.

And how are my needs any different from Darla's or even Voldon's?

There is no honor in the obsession. A commander must be stronger than others. Am I any better than Voldon where I straddle this crevasse of man verses beast? Certainly, being strong enough to understand the difference had to signify my heightened awareness and make my choices for the greater good. So, the metaphysical attraction between Darla and I indicates more than narcissism is behind our desires.

Voldon will not succeed. His choice harbors the flaw. Not mine. Nor will his actions force me to make the wrong choice.

\* \* \* \*

Darla wanted out of the damned pod fighter. Not because of loneliness, she noted. Living in self-induced isolation for almost three years aboard *The Seeker* while pretending to despise The Cause as well as Goro only proved I supported free-thinking justice. But I spent those years in a large forested starship chamber. This man-sized aerosol can left little room for fidgeting. Twenty-two hours prostrate made my legs ache to stretch. And it wasn't like an ex-florist with a black-belt in karate knew how to command a space-worthy craft in order to locate a

tropical paradise.

Talk about ironic. Daddy would mutter about paradise lost if he caught wind of my latest escapade gone awry. Not to mention, Goro obviously has me right where he wants me. In need of his assistance. That wasn't such a bad thing. But all the waiting to join free-thinking forces as a were-assassin was growing old when a girl just wanted to fight for Earth. For what felt right and made my strange psychic power seem like it had a purpose other than making me a freak.

The pod fighter shifted, lowering with the sensation of an elevator ride.

"Prepare to disembark, Darla," the computer stated.

Where am I? "What's going on? Where is this place?"

"You're on planet Vek. Commander Goro is waiting for you."

What about the others? "And the crew?"

"Two life pods have landed. Three more will arrive within an Earth hour."

Three's a crowd. So much for ending the madness of waiting to kick alien emperor ass with a big orange-eyed hunk spouting promises of love and amazing sex. There would be too many crew members lurking to allow me to work with the group through sexual unification and blood mating. No. I was going to go solo again. Certainly, Goro would say we needed to postpone consummation of our relationship as were-mates. It almost seemed like he truly preferred abstinence.

*Destiny obviously doesn't care about my feelings.*

Am I wrong or would any other woman than a girl peddling bouquets fall for a man who could coo the most fascinating points to ponder that could make my heart melt but never come through with the promised goods? Maybe it was just my fascination with martial arts that drew me to Goro. He reeked of strength and protection and changed my future from one where I never fit in to one where I lived in a place as anything but an oddball hiding my psychic power. Surrounded by psychics, I am at home. At least somewhat. But waiting to work as a psychic were-mate was just going to have to be enough because it was damned sure better than being back home on Earth. Besides, Goro called the shots. Time to stretch the kinks out of these two legs. "Open the hatch, computer."

The pod's hatch opened to a purple sky and looming branches loaded with elliptical leaves.

Not so bad. But a girl accustomed to blue sky might find the fuchsia atmosphere unsettling. Unfamiliar. Like observing Goro's approach to testing his inferiors. An odd strategy that often used many of his mercenaries to sniff out traitors. I just hadn't ever been so manipulative back home. And, yes, Goro was manipulative.

Little did the crew realize they were the mice being batted around by the cats. Fresh recruits inducted into The Cause became my focus requiring I work the good cop angle, mostly with earthlings brought aboard the ship. Me, the familiar voice pondering choices while hanging around the universe's free-thinking oasis in The Chamber, I feigned the voice of reason in the middle of nowhere where earthlings heard nothing but an eerie silence in a sterile world surrounded by deep space. And they talked to me. Always spilled their guts. I ensured every inductee's motive was straight and true. But here hovered wispy clouds and almost earth-like trees. A bit of comforting familiarity blaring a warning. Was the warning for me?

Crazy Darla would take note of a warning on *The Seeker*. That's what she was all about. A warning from earth. Living breathing caution. So put on your party hat, Crazy Darla. Now is the time to learn what the other crew members expected from the Darla they knew. Maybe a little kick ass if anyone got too close? No problem.

Just maintain Goro's game.

Strong fingers curled around the straight edge of my cockpit. Goro's bald softening features slid into view. "How's my girl?" he whispered.

"Bipeds shouldn't lie down as long as I have."

The corner of his mouth twitched with a fleeting smile. "You can stretch them wrestling with me." He winked. "The others expect a good show."

Why did that type of exhibition always translate into suggested foreplay with my biker Goth guy? Stop dangling carrots before the miserable rabbit. "How about I kick your butt?" I shoved up until I could drag my boots into a position to ram my heels into the pod fighter's metallic floor board.

Goro arched a black eyebrow. "I miss that innocent young woman I saved on earth."

He should have thought about that before he decided to abstain and tuck me into his Eden-like nature chamber. I wasn't pure enough to stash awake like Eve. And Eve eventually led to the fall! "See what happens when you reveal to the girl that the world she knew was a joke." I swung a leg over the pod's side, then the other, and dropped to the ground to face Goro. "The cornered animal strikes back," I snarled, pretending I didn't care for Goro and scanned the group of six white-cloaked humanoids eyeing me with caution at what they had obviously deemed a safe distance from which to stand from the crazy captive who could levitate anything to use as a projectile.

Talk about more familiarity in what appeared to be a good old football huddle from back home. Although, it would have been more fun to finally see their reactions as she shape shifted. Too bad on that trick. You had to have a blood mate to shape shift.

Goro turned his swinging black leather cloak toward our audience. "Let's sit down and discuss our future, everyone." His voice rang with authority.

The crowd paused, shot cautious glances between each other, and slowly lowered to squat.

The motion was a strange shift from discomfort to downright awkward. And the Darla the crew knew would have pounced on awkward. Better play the game. I stretched my stride toward them in eight monster-biting steps, shrinking the distance between us in a nanosecond.

One of the two women rose and stepped rearward in nothing more than an instinctual act of self-preservation.

Nice to see I'm still given the respect I'm due.

The female crew member's rapid breathing only warned she was ready to bolt.

So much for the game. I slid my gaze from the wide-eyed stares before me and scanned the dense trees.

Yes. They'd wonder if I would make a run for freedom. Crazy Darla was all about avoiding were-mate blood fucking. Although, the commander draped in black leather who halted at my side was pretty damned sexy. Worth a lifetime's punishment in the afterlife if that's what mating with him earned a girl. And I damn sure intended on being punished.

Crazy Darla hadn't missed the commander's undulating musculature and the dimples that melted away his spiritual checkmate exterior while I attacked everyone with all of my Biblical points on gloom and doom blood collecting, fear of vampires, and eternal damnation. Really, would anybody ever expect anything less from the daughter of a southern preacher?

I definitely had become the black sheep my father claimed I was. How does such a woman behind a counter covered in beautiful blooms incite such terror in her parents? It must have been the martial arts because it certainly wasn't the psychic powers I hid from the rest of

planet earth. You really had to hide that kind of thing when your parents were nuts. But at long last, all Mom and Dad's Christian quotes on preserving my soul had finally been put to good use. Here. In the heavens. I regurgitated them to my advantage. Right where Mom and Dad thought souls lived in eternal bliss. Not in the afterlife.

And everyone is scared as Hell of me.

Save me from irony beneath this weird purple sky, universe.

"Join us, Darla," Goro prompted from where he stood at my side.

Should I cause problems or accommodate him? Problems. No. Accommodation. Oh the madness in this feigned lunacy. I exhaled a tumultuous sigh and met Goro's familiar stoic stare.

"Please." He waved a palm toward fluffy grass on the ground adopting his typical please-cooperate-stance he managed when standing in front of his crew.

"I've been locked inside that sardine can for an unbelievably long time. I'd rather die standing up if we're attacked." I shifted my weight in my boots and snaked my arms across my chest in a typical Darla reaction of defiance. "If not just to stretch for a while."

Goro's stoic gaze never wavered.

The man was a master at playing mind games. He'd have to be in order to beat evil. How odd I ran from good versus evil on earth and fell right back into it. Wouldn't Daddy be thrilled to know I had somewhat taken up his war against eternal damnation after his twenty-nine years of worrying about what he deemed my not-so-correct focus in life? The abstinence part was the clincher. Goro had no idea how much I intended on making him pay for the longest wait of my life. Sex. Sex. Sex.

Talk about the bed you make. Especially when you could have sex in it.

"Darla," Goro insisted I sit.

Well, after acting like I would attack the refugees, wanted to bolt, and defied the commander, I'd must have gotten my point across. Why not sit? I lowered into a crouch, spreading the fingers of one hand into the cool blades of vegetation blanketing the murky forest floor.

Just to appear ready to spring into the wild wood. That's what Crazy Darla would do. Escape. Or attempt to. And why did playing along with Goro seem so natural? I studied the swirling clouds above the tree tops.

"Three more escape pods will be arriving shortly," Goro stated aloud instead of using mindspeak. "Until then, I want everyone to remain here. We've got one healer, two navigators, a cook, and two maintenance crewmen. I can't afford to lose anyone."

Self please note how he gave me no value in referring only to the crew. Excellent poker move. Not that I ever had a gambling problem. The man was on his game.

The group of refugees nodded in an odd sort of manner as if to include me in their discussions. Weird. But I'd give Goro a good run for his money. "Since Voldon's coming, when do you expect him to show?"

Goro wagged his head. "Too many of *The Seeker's* spacecraft are seeking sanctuary. Voldon will be lucky to have a handful of *Mawshwuc's* ships to follow a fraction of the life pods. We need to remain calm. Keep our wits about us."

Crazy Darla wouldn't go along with anything dealing with those vampire *Mawshwucs*. She'd bitch. "You mean like this isn't the end of the universe?" I shoved to my feet, thrust out an index finger, waved at the pink sky, and raised my voice. "The end of the universe I warned everyone connected to blood fucking about?"

The crowd shot worried glances between each other.

Goro inhaled deeply, appearing to brace himself. “Sit, Darla. Join us. If we focus upon light in our darkest hour, we will see our way through darkness.”

Oh, nice philosophical comeback. “I’ve warned you about light and darkness all along. Why mention it now? Has this calamity shown you the evil ways of your choices? Are you blood fuckers repenting your sins?” Daddy would have loved that one.

Goro’s searing stare could have sliced butter. “Perhaps, Darla, our situation is based on your choices. After all, you are the reason Voldon focuses most of his attention on my starship.”

Was pointing the finger at me supposed to shut me up? After all, I was just playing his damned game. And he’s the one who approached me on Earth.



## Chapter Three

Darla's expression never glared so icy in Goro's direction. But she had to realize he didn't need her upsetting the crew any further, he thought. Now was not the time to throw daggers at homeless people.

"How dare you blame me for this," she snarled.

Something deeply internal resonated in that reply. Or was her reaction merely her playing along? "Please join us, Darla. Sit. Listen as we form a plan."

Darla spun her back to the rest of the crew.

What was the problem? Survival was pivotal here. She had to realize. Any issue that would offset the group's focus was certain to fragment the effort. She could burn either literally or pretend to stew. As long as she kept her comments to herself, I could mold this ragtag crew into a survival force.

"What now, commander?" the navigator asked assertively.

Blessed Devros, the man pushed the point that we all needed to work together with a plan. "We'll set up camp. No one is to wander off. Stay close. If we are discovered, we'll need every crew member here to help defend the group."

Darla took one defiant step toward three massive tree trunks.

Was she pushing me to react? "The life pods extract water from the air. And, bless Devros, we landed on a planet with breathable air. Air and water. That's two problems solved. Sleeping in our pods takes care of shelter." The escape craft were studded with solar panels. The energy would create lighting and heat. That's not enough energy to refuel the escape pods and lead the crew off Vek. But a warm dry place behind a locked door to sleep was as good as breathable air. The space rations wouldn't last long. It was better to find food here than to eat the rations.

The crew watched me observe Darla's curious movements with a mixture of eye colors representing the various worlds from which the crew originated.

Hope wallowed in those glinting wells. Now, they just needed sustenance. "Beyond the rations in each of our crafts, we'll have to rely upon Vek's vegetation and hunting until a starship arrives to pick up those of you who landed in the escape pods. Does anyone have a preference for food acquisition?"

\* \* \* \*

Cannibalism. After all, it's not like these extraterrestrials were earthlings, Darla thought. Didn't that rank the crew under the meat column of our food checklist? I snaked my arms across my chest as each crew member noted his or her boring idea of chores.

Were they watching me, the loose cannon? I'm not about to turn and cooperate just because Goro wants me to. Maybe Goro no longer needed me. Maybe I am just another pawn in his game. Good thing we never mated. Talk about a disaster.

Maybe there was something to Daddy's ramblings? Since Daddy couldn't explain my ability to levitate objects, he and his religious dogma were anything but answers. Truth is apparently out here. Somewhere. Obviously not buried in muscles and tight leather. I just need to find it. And now I'm off ship with a personal spacecraft I can use to rip out of here with any time.

The refugees' voices began to heighten with excitement.

Forget Crazy Darla. I'm obviously in this for myself. Although, I might need a surgeon to remove my foot from Goro's ass. I doubt his healer is up to the job. Then again, Goro's shaved head is so far up his ass that I probably won't get my boot in deep enough to require assistance yanking it out. Yeah. Use the stupid Earth chick.

Like I'm stupid. If it weren't for all I knew from Daddy's forced Bible study, Goro's plan would never have panned out. And after what he did handling the Sevra issue by betraying the trust of his most coveted mercenary Red Trekaar, how could I possibly expect any better treatment? I'm just a naïve earthling. A fool.

I so dislike being played the fool.

And my pod fighter is all mine! It runs on my biorhythms. Mine alone. They'll never get it off the ground again unless I call the command. One more crack and I'm out of here. It'll be nighty nite, tucking myself into the cockpit, and blast off.

Grass whispered as crew members shuffled off on task through the understory.

Almost all the footsteps.

Not all of them. Unfortunately. Some black boots claimed a spot next to mine.

"Darla, tell me what's wrong," Goro whispered.

An eye roll seemed due. But why bother when nobody would see it? I slid my gaze to meet his stern mask. "I was trying to act the way they expected. You didn't have to blame me for all of this," I hissed through clenched teeth. "You have a lot of balls for pointing the finger at me." Maybe I should add now.

Goro eyed the others beyond my shoulder. "What else could I do?" he whispered. "It's a different game out here. We are no longer aboard a controlled environment."

"Thanks for the update. You should have told me before I climbed out of my pod fighter."

"I'm sorry. Everything happened so quickly. Now, I need you to cool down the act. To lie low as earthlings say. Perhaps appear to fear our situation enough to cooperate."

Maybe he was telling the truth. Oh, to feel the hunger in an apologetic kiss. Some promise of a future. I stared at his stern smile, those soft lips he'd kissed me with time and time again.

He didn't flinch.

Okay, maybe he had an audience. But this planet wasn't resonating Destiny. "So, what then? Are we to a point we can mate and be done with this charade?" And I no longer had to worry about what he truly felt about me.

Goro seemed to stretch up another inch.

Not good given the man always stiffened his spine when he was about to pontificate.

"Not yet." He stepped back toward the bustling refugees.

Apologetic dismissals weren't going to keep the masses at bay much longer. "Three years is an eternity, Goro," I shouted at his retreating black coat.

He turned a shoulder and a calm mask her direction. "Be thankful you have an eternity. Without The Cause, your life as you know it would have ceased to exist three years ago."

Duh. Like I hadn't entered a new existence with him. Pontifications were the last straw. Forget love.

But where in the universe should I go? Goro is really all I have. Maybe I'm just stressed and need to calm down. Maybe I just needed my mate. Completely needed him. Sex had to be the answer. I followed Goro's retreating form away from the escape pods and foraging crew

members, skirting a maze of tree trunks, deeper into the secretive cover of the forest.

He knows I'm here. And he's not arguing with me to stay with the crew. Good. Sex was the answer. I stretched my stride to catch up with him.

He turned, stopping, scanning me from head to toe.

The man's mask hinted of hunger.

Good. I walked right up to him, placed my palms against the soft warm leather of his vest, and slid both hands across his beating heart.

He studied the way the touch held my hands captive at his chest.

Would he fight a kiss? Nobody could possibly be watching. "Goro?"

His gaze slid from my hands to my eyes.

What question was that dancing in his gaze? And answer was easy enough to get. I rose on my tiptoes toward his mouth.

He didn't step away.

I pressed my lips against the soft velvet of his mouth.

\* \* \* \*

Goro wanted to snake his arms around Darla, to drive himself so deeply inside her—mouth and the promised soothing heat of her soul—that she melded into his own spirit forever. And nobody would ever separate them, he inwardly swore. Those soft lips fed on my mouth.

Need shot from his heart to his groin.

One bite from her would send my soul off on a ravenous tirade. I couldn't risk her safety. Not yet. Maybe tomorrow. But not until I worked out a plan for everyone. And touching her skin only elevated my problems. There was no way to break the contact without painful contact. Sweet delicious touching... I sucked in a deep breath through her lips to brace for the touch, grabbed her bare forearms, shoved her sweet hot mouth away a few inches, and met her confused gaze.

Or was that anger?

She had to stop this. At least wait until they were safe. And then she could have him. Yes. I'd end this madness. Later after I saved the crew. "Darla, I need to think. Too many people need me right now. We must be stronger."

She snorted and jerked her arms from my grasp. "It's always the same old song." She pivoted and walked away.

Didn't she realize the pain she set off every time she begged for completion? She had to.

The day plodded onward for me even though I wished I could hold the glowing sun still instead of groveling in survival mode between the toes of a forest like an insignificant insect. The three life pods landed, seven more crew members arrived, and Darla said nothing.

She was definitely annoyed. Why now after so many years working for The Cause? Working with me? She had to realize how much I sacrificed in my celibacy. Just how many other men could live their lives with the woman they wanted within reach? Always there. Always tempting. But I waited for the most opportune moment to gift Destiny what she awaited through the prize female I'd carefully chosen to fight for free thinking. And here was Darla. Always taunting me with those seductive curves packaged in body hugging leather.

At least we weren't truly mated. The metaphysical force's blood lust pulling us together after mating would cause me to lunge at her. To satisfy my carnal needs. Time to keep steady and maintain the façade of a commander with a good shave. Give his scalp three months' reprieve from shaving and my hair would hang past my shoulders. I'd truly be anything but a commander. Yes. Time to tend to the debt he owed for existence. A lack of respect for purpose

would only get a man into trouble. I strode toward a large thick tree trunk twice my girth.

Back there, behind the smooth black and gray bark, I'd ensure no one would say I had failed to carry through with my commander duties.

Life was so accursedly demanding.

Before I ran the last sharp edge of my favorite blade against the stubby hairs struggling to remain in the universe atop my head, my thoughts wandered to how easy life was when I was a young unruly farming boy dreaming of wielding a warrior's sword instead of the plow I should have helped my father push.

A glint of pink light flashed in my periphery.

Metal.

"Who's there?" I asked with words in case the newcomer was an earthling incapable of mindspeak.

A presence pushed into my mind.

"Hinxos, commander," the navigator said in mindspeak, shuffled onto the shadowy scene of tree trunks, and assumed a subservient stance.

The eerie violet shadows painted the man in a not-so-masculine hue.

So much for personal time in the wilderness. I wiped my blade clean on the leather covering my thigh and sheathed the glinting six-inch blade in the tall shaft of my boot. Just when had a knife replaced his Xquine warrior's sword? "What then, Hinxos?"

"I toyed with the communication relay in my escape pod. The —"

"You altered your transmission beacon? That goes against regulation. You know the likelihood of any two pods sending out survivor reports to all the different quadrants is low. This was a foolish mistake, Hinxos."

"But, commander, I received word that a starship is en route to this quadrant to pick up survivors."

A rescue mission? Talk about luck in working for the right side. "This is blessed news. Tell the others."

"There is more, commander." The pilot shifted his footing.

Nervously. Why did the point make my gut sink? "What else?"

"The communication relays speak of Voldon's fighters focusing on this quadrant. He wants to find Darla. He wants to kill you himself. There's a bounty out on both of you. He wants you both alive."

Was that really any sort of revelation? "I do not fear Voldon. Tell the others."

"There is more."

Not more. Not three things. Three had such a bad resonance like the universal theme in a lover's triad. And Hinxos saved the news for last. The information must be horrific. I stared into Hinxos's eyes, two squared windows bluer than earth's oceans from space. "Surprise me."

"Voldon has sired a child."

Not many Voldons managed that feat throughout the war over the past millennia. But what then did the monster want with Darla? Why was Hinxos staring at me as if he feared what he must utter next? "Is there anything else I want to know?"

"It's Darla's child."

## Chapter Four

Every cell in Goro's body jolted with deep-sinking truth. Yes, truly shocking news, he concluded and nodded at Hinxos while pushing into the man's mind. *"Thank you. Please do not disclose the information about Darla to the others until I have spoken with her."* But would Hinxos hide the news? Logic dictated the man was a reliable crew member. However, the crew despised Darla. Hinxos was one of them. And if the crew caught wind of a way to profit on handing her over, certainly they'd mutiny.

Hinxos nodded. *"I will inform the rest of the crew of the rescue mission and the bounty hunters to avoid any mishaps before the Mawshwucs arrive. My word, commander."* The pilot's white form disappeared among the tree trunks.

Is a man's word strong enough to stop the fear welling in my gut? No. Chaos threatened to snatch the bit of order I'd struggled to create in this wild forest and turn the game on me again.

What about Darla? I had tried never to let her out of my sight on earth once I had learned Voldon knew of her friendship with me. Could Voldon have intervened, spent time with her, mated with her, or sent a *Mawshwuc* to collect a sample of her blood? Or worse? Had Darla been able to conceal Voldon's blood aboard *The Seeker* as Voldon's mate? Could she be in an even more secret alliance with Voldon where I've been played the fool for three years?

No. Not Darla. But she played along in the game so well. As well as I do. And I can't read her lesser-evolved mind. Confronting her might set her off. If she were in on a plan with Voldon, how would she react? A wise pawn would lie low. Feign innocence.

Maybe I should send the crew on food acquisition to speak with her alone. Yes. Wait for privacy. Give her that much to reveal she has a child. I skirted the tree trunk and found Darla leaning on her pod fighter.

Grimacing or sulking. Definitely disgusted with me.

What will she do?

What would I do?

Curse Voldon and all his manipulation.

Darla's pinched gaze locked on my determined footsteps as I crossed the grassy distance between us.

The woman was obviously still perturbed at what she deemed a personal insult earlier in the day. Rather two insults. Her motives seemed so sincere before. Always genuine. Never had she led me to think she ever worked against me. And the way she begged for sexual union... Every muscle in her body proved she wanted me day after day. She *wasn't* Voldon's were-mate. The rumor was wrong. Voldon did not have her child. Not her natural child in any case.

If Voldon had something genetically created from Darla, it was not of her choosing. I halted steps from where she fumed sitting in the grass, scanned the foraging crew members amidst the forest's towering tree trunks. "Let's focus on a meal. Everyone search for food for two earth hours. Stay in pairs. If you don't return in two hours, a search party will be sent to find you."

The ragtag party slowly teamed up and disappeared into the violet shadows of the forest. Now for Darla. I turned back to where she hunkered and glared.

Her glower didn't offer a moment's reprieve. "So are you and I going hunting?" she snapped.

Darla's black leather killing attire matched her bitter tone. She needed to work off some anger. Maybe hunting might help her vent that frustration. Yet, after she learned of the child, her attitude would undoubtedly sour. But how does one tell another of the most horrid lie? I knelt at her side and inhaled deeply.

Her mask melted from disgust to suspicion then graded into curiosity.

Curiosity often was the initial inklings of defiance. She'd need a lot of defiance to sabotage Voldon's secret baby stratagem. "Voldon has a bounty out on us. He wants us alive."

"Tell me something I couldn't have guessed."

Well, that sarcasm asked for it with her annoying retort, Devros. "He claims he has a child he had with you."

Darla's caustic gaze mushroomed into full-blown wide-eyed terror. "That's impossible." She wagged her head and shot to her feet. "That bastard never touched me. Never did more than take me out for dinner. Never—" She stomped left and back right. "Never." She turned, hurled herself against her pod fighter, and beat the alien metal like a pissed-off mercenary in her murderous knife studded black leather. "It's a lie."

The reaction didn't reek traitorous. I focused on using a whisper tone that reverberated authority and commanded respect. "Listen, Darla. Sometimes we think we've got everything covered, but we missed something. He could have gotten your DNA, or some blood, or even put you under—"

She whirled wearing a seething mask. "Like alien abduction crap? You mean something along the line of what I've already experienced? God, Goro, you think I'm part of Voldon's new kink in his grand scheme against The Cause. Don't you?"

Not after witnessing her reaction.

\* \* \* \*

Damn, the man. Darla didn't care for the universe's ultimate ass-wipe's slander. Goro's silence wasn't good either, she fumed. He killed quite a few traitors since I'd joined his crew. There was nothing to prevent him from turning on me.

My legs twitched to run.

"No, Darla. I do not think you had any hand in Voldon's madness. There are many ways he could have taken what he needed to produce a child by you. He's probably trying to force a wedge between us. Let's stop it now."

What a ridiculously calm reaction. Only Goro would stand there stock still,. Waiting for me to screw myself. Nobody was going to stare me down and call me a liar. "I'm a fucking virgin. And no man will ever get to claim he had a child by me until it tore through my body on a one-way trip to breathe, scream, and terrorize the universe, Goro. Voldon may have some knock off stuffed animal. But his gremlin is not mine."

Goro slowly nodded where he crouched in the twigs and leaves.

He just let me rant instead of rising to control my reaction. Was he observing me? Using that god-damned power voice on me that he used on everyone else?

"I believe you." He waited.

For what? He could put me to the test. Take my virginity. But maybe the secret baby changed things between them. He had to be thinking he risked his life in handing over his blood to me during the were-assassin marriage ritual. However, showing him that Voldon hadn't mated with me was the only to prove my innocence. Would he even want me with the elevated

risk of being enslaved if Voldon got one drop of his blood essence? “I can prove it to you. But—”

“Yes.” He nodded again. “You can. But I believe you, and there is no reason for you to feel you entered into a bargain such as were-assassin marriage for any purpose other than to mate with the male you love and fight for what you deem right. We will not discuss that option anymore.”

Was this more avoidance or the reaction of a man who feared losing his freedom of thought? At the risk of being seen embracing by the crew or not, he was going to prove he still cared. I threw my arms around his shoulders and planted my lips against his warm mouth. The warmest, softest, gentlest lips I’d ever kissed.

He hesitated, all stiff-lipped.

Come on. Kiss me. I tried to thrust my tongue between his lips.

He backed off, pushing me to arms’ length.

What was he thinking? God to read his mind. Talk about a luxury some of us sentient beings were kept from using. Not to mention, my body burned for him for years the way he confessed his did for mine. And now he won’t kiss me? So, maybe I don’t want to mate with him anymore either. This whole it’s-my-baby crap finally pushed the last straw. I stared at his stoic mask.

“We should try to sit and recall what happened. Attempt to backtrack and recount the few times you were around him. We can solve this mystery, Darla.”

“Just say it. You don’t want to kiss me anymore.”

A tiny little twinge tickled the godforsaken need to cry deep inside me.

Powerlessness. Why bother me now? I gulped the disturbing sensation into oblivion and studied what was once the man I thought I would happily marry.

But everything was a game in this world of psychic warfare. And here sat the only man I dared trust throwing dice with. But could I crap shoot any longer? He was too neat. Too tidy. Everything was too organized with his polished exterior and his hypnotic voice. Crazy Darla had a better chance of surviving this war. Alone. Even if she was lost in deep space.

“Darla,” he scanned the surrounding woods. “We need to take care. What if Voldon’s spies are here?”

I’m dead if he’s decided I’m guilty. How do I get Crazy Darla to save my ass?

“Please, Darla. Sit and think. We have plenty of time before the starship arrives.”

Yes. Plenty of time for a captive to decide if escape was even possible.

\* \* \* \*

Goro struggled with publicly hugging his charge and tying her up since touching her was risky. And she needed to just take some time to think things through, he decided. Although, every cell in my body awoke with the essence of one of her cells against mine. Skin to skin contact never helped when a warrior gazed at the woman who sent all the blood rushing to his loins. Touching her was just sex to a were-assassin, whether we consummated our relationship or not. And since mating didn’t seem to be the best solution to appease her honor at the moment, I damned sure know what thoughts danced to the beat of a war drum in her mind. Sex and betrayal. That’s all I would think about.

Life had to be torture when the one person she thought her friend just came off a royal bastard. Not to mention, anyone could be watching. Observing our interaction. Especially since Hinxos could have spread the word about the baby. Maintaining Darla’s fake social persona was essential to saving her. For now, she would just have to stew. “You can try to sleep or join me

hunting. Hunting will help you vent some anger.”

“I’m sleepy.” She blinked.

Almost provocatively.

Sleep meant being alone. Without me. Certainly another silent slap in her face. But sleep also equated to invaluable time where she could think this catastrophe out to realize this was just another part of the game. That she had nothing to fear. That I stand beside her. “I won’t abandon you, Darla. You have my word. Today has been hard on all of us.” I rose until I calmly looked down at the angry furrows slashing her brow. “Sleep. Take what Destiny has denied me.”

Her round ass crawled into her pod fighter.

Amazing ass.

My body went rock hard.

Just crawl into a pod and rest. Shut out the chaos for a few minutes. Forget about how tightly the leather pulled across her backside. Sleep. Just get some blessed sleep.

Ship or not, a commander never had that kind of luxury. Especially with his love-sworn mate afoot. Donning the cloak of responsibility may warm a soul but rarely quenches a leader’s hunger. I needed to remain alert in case Hinxos didn’t come through with his promise.

But had the satisfying light feeding my snarling inner beast just burned out in Darla’s eyes?

No. It couldn’t have.

Everyone in the fleet knew about the child by now. There was no hiding the news from anyone. Any more pods reaching Vek would carry crew members who had received the same news. There was no way to circumvent the issue.

How had today gone so terribly awry? Voldon’s new tactic completely trashed my future with Darla. Time to try to make amends. I climbed up to her open cockpit and found her staring up at the violet sky.

She’s ignoring me. “I know how difficult today has been for you. I feel Destiny has forsaken me as well.”

Her inquisitive gaze slid to mine.

At least I no longer had to look at the curves of her enchanting body. “But I can’t walk away knowing I’ve failed anyone. Especially you. I will reveal Voldon’s lie and prove you are as important to me as The Cause. Just give me enough time to do so.”

Her questioning mask melted into curiosity. “Would you believe that if you were in my shoes?”

She no longer believed in me. “I never lie to you. You and I always work together. In the way of mates.” I’d lose my mind if I operated alone in this insane war of mind control.

“So we’re mated now?” She sighed loudly. “Lying in a spacecraft I know little about, so far from home with a man who promised he loved me but turned on me today, chased by a mad man who claims to have lifted one of my eggs and grown a child from it, and lying around waiting for the same psycho to harvest more of my eggs or worse, I hate to tell you but I’ve already lost my last wit.” She shot me a forced smile, rolled her head to one side, and closed her eyes.

Her brown hair pooled around the sides of her head.

Holding her the way I should have. I should have done more for her. Since I led those thoughts astray, I’d better find something else to do and allow sleep to work its magic on the heart of my heart. Or I just might pull her out of that pod fighter and force her to mate with me.



But rape wasn't noble. Time to think of a way to make amends.

\* \* \* \*

The sky deepened in hue only to darken above Darla's window in the small view space she had of the world staring up from her pod fighter. How had my life in a new world where a psychic earth girl finally fits in suddenly been turned on end, she wondered. Because there's nobody else who can help me with this upheaval. Goro is my only friend. If he can even be called that anymore.

Dare I believe him?

Everything always circled back to Goro. And now he left me here to contemplate life. Whether that's life with children in a happy marriage or life locked in a containment cell awaiting termination for being a traitor, who knew? Maybe I'm supposed to dwell on both. Or the *life* where supposedly a child with my genetic material is running around the universe, certainly terrorizing innocent people with its father, the bastard of all bastards. Why stay and play along with Goro? Why wait for Voldon to capture me? Why bother with anybody in this freaking nightmare? How could I possibly owe allegiance to anyone? I'm better off running for my life. "Computer?"

"Please state your password," the mechanical voice commanded.

"Giggle Bunny." Like I could ever truly escape in an extraterrestrial pod fighter with a code word supplied by Goro. It was worth an old-fashioned try.

"Welcome, Darla."

"Take me to earth."

The cockpit's hatch silently snapped out the purple sky. The pod fighter vibrated quietly. And the floor suddenly rammed up into my back.

Airborne. Sweet mother of mercy. I've never been flying alone.

My gut flopped against the sensation.

What do I do to go home?

"Darla, Commander Goro is attempting to open a line of communication with you."

"I don't feel like talking right now. Just get me to earth as fast as you can." Hopefully, this dash for freedom wasn't a waste. "Where is Goro?"

"His pod fighter is about to lift off."

"I'm not surprised. How far away are we?"

"Forty-four seconds."

How long was that in racing pod fighters? "Don't let him catch us."

The pod fighter surged forward.

Why did *oh shit* come to mind? "Computer, can he catch us?"

"He can't fly any faster than we can. And we're already in space. He must blast clear of the atmosphere to match our speed."

But when the speed was matched, how much time stood between us? "So, I will always have forty-four seconds to beat him to earth?"

"Yes, unless one of you alters your speed."

In a world where every second mattered in saving your hide, forty-four began to sound like a huge number. Seconds or hours. A lifeline to existence. I'll take them all.

"A large spacecraft is bearing down upon us from the starboard side," the computer blared.

What? The universe would be playing a wicked joke on me if it was Voldon. "I don't know who or what that is, but get me to earth."

“Understood.”

Okay, time to go home. A few magic words would work wonders now. If only I could think of a couple.

“Darla, the spacecraft is locking onto the ship.”

What ? “How can they do that? I’m in an undetectable pod fighter.”

The ship jolted.

The toes of my boots hit metal where they were tucked into the darkness of the cockpit. Space seemed to shift, drawing me backward.

“Any type of vessel traveling through an atmosphere creates a heat signature an observer can detect.”

The ship’s movement backward became smooth and clean.

“What’s happening, computer?”

“The spacecraft is pulling us aboard.”

Shit. Maybe a little prayer was in order? “I want to go to earth. Blast out of this, or something.”

“That is impossible.”

Maybe I jumped the gun with Goro today. Crazy Darla’s tactics might not be the best for all situations.

## Chapter Five

“Commander Goro, a spacecraft is taking Darla’s pod fighter aboard.”

Gods curse a tick-sucking *Mawshwuc*, Goro swore. What else could happen? I almost jumped into a sitting position. “View screen, now.”

The radar screen jiggled into a picture of star-studded deep space with a not-so-serene picture of a pod fighter being drawn by a purple energy beam aboard a large round disc.

Darla’s computer wouldn’t be able to counteract the power of the beam. Typical opportunistic scavengers. And she hadn’t seen any of this coming. “It’s Crellon?”

“Yes, commander. We can’t disrupt the retraction beam.”

Darla was being taken hostage by bounty hunters. What could one man in a pod fighter do? Survive and follow. If they didn’t use her sexually then trade her in for Voldon’s reward, she’d be fortunate to become a token illegal exotic alien of some wealthy free thinker who could hide his slave in ways where nobody would ever be able to locate her. Or *worse*.

Forget sleeping well tonight. Somebody had to save her. And I’m the only person who cares. But to save her meant to shirk duty. To shirk duty meant to lose Darla. Losing her was not an option. Three years of declining her offers had been pure torture. Now, to lose what Destiny dangled in front of a man’s nose resonated tragic.

The Crellon spacecraft’s docking bay hatch opened like a huge brilliant mouth in deep dark space.

But what of my command? I can’t just disappear without leaving the survivors a plan of action. “Do we have time to return to the crew on Vek and follow Darla?”

“No, commander. You’ll never relocate the Crellon ship once it hits a wormhole relay.”

Damn, Voldon and my stupidity for not dragging Darla into the woods and claiming her blood as mine. Giving her what she always begged for would have remedied her anger and proven to her that my faith in her was solid.

Then no one could have insisted she was anything but my were-mate.

Nobody would dare accuse her of lying with Voldon to produce this child he claimed to have.

I should have taken her heart and soul when she extended the offer. “Keep on that Crellon ship’s trail.”

All but the tip of the nose of Darla’s pod fighter was completely lit inside the docking bay.

She was almost taken.

From me.

To turn back to The Cause meant to abandon her. “Open a secured encrypted line to send a brief message to navigator Hinxo’s escape pod. He’s reconfigured his safety beacon and can sense messages from a broader range. Tell him I’ve gone to save Darla from bounty hunters. The crew is to await the rescue team and depart with or without me.”

The descending Crellon hatch shut out the last vestige of life from the bounty ship.

But Darla wasn’t gone. Just captive.

Not good when aboard a Crellon ship.

Crellon crews may seem sex-crazed, but Darla had a better chance of surviving with bounty hunters than she did on *The Seeker* without a guardian commander. She was a hot commodity to Voldon as well as wealthy free thinkers who often broke law to satisfy their unconventional ideas. And surely Voldon would be pissed if these Crellon animals had their way with Darla. Unless she was a sex spy.

No. Not Darla.

And after all, the Crellons had each other. As the earth saying went, time was of the essence. My very essence. And Darla's.

Time to save her. "Follow the Crellon saucer."

The radar screen flashed back on the view screen.

Any second the stationary blip of the bounty ship would be gone. And if I falter in the chase, finding Darla could take months. Legend or not, The Cause wouldn't appreciate my abandoning my post. But Darla had nobody else.

I fell in love with her.

I brought her into space.

I owe it to her to try to rescue her whether or not she holds me in her heart. After that, I'll deal with where her allegiance lies. At least I will have tried to learn the truth for myself.

\* \* \* \*

Darla's pod fighter slowed to a stop as if the creeping backward motion had pulled her to some unknown force's destination. "Computer, where am I?" she asked.

"On a Crellon bounty ship."

Bounty isn't a word that a girl Voldon's paying top dollar for wants to hear. "How can I escape?"

"I will be grounded until the retraction beam is dissolved. However, only you and Goro are cleared to open my hatch. You are safe here until you can't stand lying down or have other biological issues."

Oh, yes. Let's sit around and have a friendly chitchat with the computer while my ass is on the line. I'm trapped in a freaking can inside a bigger can surrounded by aliens. What in the Hell am I supposed to do? Come on, Crazy Darla. Think of something. "How do I get out of here?"

"I cannot answer that question. Your biostats are off the charts, Darla. Remain calm."

And how does a person deal with all these foreign things when she can't even see what's going on outside her can inside the bigger can full of extraterrestrials? "How long can my ship be detained?"

"They can't hold a pod fighter in stasis and hyper-jump to a wormhole relay. If there's a second to escape, I will."

"What's stasis?"

"The retraction beam must be terminated so they can travel through the wormhole."

To ask why meant I'd be left even more confused. You know, one second seems incredibly minute compared to forty-four. Since there's no other option, one second would have to do. "So we wait?"

The cockpit's pitch black darkness smeared with the pod's orange lights.

"What's happening, computer?"

"The bounty hunters hyper-jumped."

That much was obvious in the way the smeared darkness vibrated in silent insanity. I'm going to die. I tried to find something to hold onto but couldn't move my rattling arms.

My teeth felt like they were going to be shaken loose.

Pod fighters were undetectable. Right? What about flying under the radar? Something was seriously wrong here. “How did the bounty hunters find me again? This fighter is supposed to fly under the radar.”

“Ships flare while flying through a planet’s atmosphere. If someone is observing, they detect the heat signature. It would not be unusual for a bounty hunter stalking refugees to lie in wait off planets claimed to harbor the refugees they search for. And Crellons traffic humanoids.”

Slavery?

So much for staying hidden.

What about Goro? Without him, I have no protection. Well, I used to have protection before Voldon announced the secret baby.

The rattling world stilled.

Holy shit.

“Two male Crellons are circling the ship outside in the docking bay,” the computer stated.

Not good. Didn’t males always want more from females? “What about that retraction beam?”

“It’s dissolved.”

Well, what was the computer waiting on? “Shouldn’t we catch one of my seconds out of here?”

“Unfortunately, I have no weapons to blast through the walls of this space craft. We’ll have to wait until a Crellon opens the hatch.”

Uh, universe, the computer never mentioned anything about needing to blast out of the spacecraft. What else did it fail to disclose? “Tell me everything about these Crellons, computer. I need to know what to expect.”

“Crellons are extremely sexually-oriented beings. They thrive on sex with any humanoid. They sell anything, including themselves. Voldon has always found Crellon activities profitable and allowed the Crellons freedom to acquire what he wants.”

That was so not what I was asking about. There had to be more beyond this freaking TMI moment. “What about escape? Did a one-second window of opportunity hinge upon blasting out of here?”

“There is no other means of escape.”

If I could just see what was going on outside this hairspray can I could hurl something at the hatch. Smash it open.

“Sleeper gas is filling the docking bay,” the computer announced.

What in the name of God is sleeper gas? This world was way too foreign compared to *The Seeker*. Where is my soon-to-be-mate Goro when I need him? If he hadn’t seen the Crellon ship funky jump, I am totally screwed. If he even cares. “I must assume sleeper gas knocks people unconscious?”

“Correct, Darla.”

“Can you keep it out of the fighter pod?”

“I—” the computer’s words droned into the indecipherable sounds the kids of *Peanuts* comics heard when adults spoke.

A need to yawn stretched my jaw wide.

Crap. And what was the computer mumbling about? My future.

So much for hearing Destiny without one’s interpreter, Goro.

\* \* \* \*

Darla's eyes popped open in dim lighting where she laid on her side, arm tousled in the same direction, facing a dark metal wall. Where were the Crellon sex fiends? My clothes are on, she noted. A good sign given the computer's warning about these aliens. But where are the Crellons?

My arms were stiff. And my legs. I kicked out, planted the sole of my boot against the wall, and shoved my stiff body backward, rolling against a soft flat surface.

Overhead curved the same dark wall.

My cell by the looks of the bar grid meeting the impenetrable solid metal. From Goro's mind games to imprisonment. So much for paradise beyond earth. Patience is definitely a virtue, universe. I need to work on mine. Okay, I get the message.

Something moved in the corner of my eye.

Beautiful men.

A little more orange than tanned in general. Not too tall. Like Goro. But muscled. And nude. Their motto had to be *why cover up what the universe created perfectly*. Some Earth girls might like watching their penises lengthen and harden. But good Earth girls heeded computer warnings and operated on lessons learned in childhood like stories about tall dark strangers. Even those good Earth girls who snuck porn flicks to their friends' homes to learn about the birds and the bees because their psycho religious fathers wouldn't let them date until they were eighteen. See why I'm all messed up, universe?

The Crellon's long dark black tightly kinked hair had to be a warning. Some kind of mark that indicated a girl should take heed and stay away.

And this girl was listening now. Yoohoo. Did you hear me, universe?

But something about my captors' overall appearance reminded me of Ancient Greeks in the artwork I often sold as prized urns—reproduction vases in my flower shop. That something almost made me want to communicate and possibly work with them to return to earth. Surely they traveled there often.

An alien male studied me with glowing white irises where he stood gripping the bars of my cell.

Those eyes were anything but dark and mysterious. Just freaky.

The other male edged over behind him, running his palms across the other's muscled arms, down to his...

That bastard was not wanking off while watching me like a two-page spread in a sex rag. A silver hatch slid open to the right.

A nude female strode into the space. She wasn't hideous. Rather, she was pretty fascinating with the shiny chain that belted her waist. It was like she was captured. Maybe more like free.

Just what was she doing veering straight for the wanking catastrophe at the metal bars? Joining in the kink ambiance!

Popping a crash course in sex into the DVD player back on Earth was one thing. This equated to a killer bee invasion with a thin piece of tissue paper holding back the stinging horde of bees. The pigs just needed something rammed upside their skulls. A projectile. I scanned the area beyond the two male humanoids.

Storage bins, two seats, a control panel...

Just something that isn't bolted down. But finding the object on this side of the bars would be difficult without using my psychic power. Why hide a natural gift? Giving the

disgusting Crellons a warning about self-control might hold back the horde. I focused on the straining toes of a male's bare foot.

A breeze kicked up in the cell.

Head thrown back, groaning at the bounty ship's stark ceiling, knuckles whitened in a death grip on the bars of my cell, the male getting pumped didn't seem to notice the unnatural wind inside the spacecraft.

Disgusting jerk. How dare he think I'm here to stroke his ego! My gaze slid up to lock on the straining male's chest.

Perfect he may have been in all his natural Grecian glory, but using me as a nasty sex poster was one blink shy of stupid.

A small metal crate lifted off the control panel.

Now to knock some shit out of the horny idiots. I focused the energy in my mind to hurl the box at the Crellons' heads.

The box smashed into one's temple, bounced off, and knocked into the other's skull.

The groaning man never flinched. His comrade's free hand flew to rub his head as he shot a cutting glance at me.

And who's threatening me? Oh yeah, the guy milking his buddy. Thick alien skulls were obviously a genetic plus for them. That's so not in my favor, universe.

The loud alien screamed, arching his body forward, ejaculating into the cell.

Jesus, that's just beyond nasty. No more flying germs, Goro. I need you. This was his fault. Damn him for the insults. If he wants to make amends, he'd better get his butt over here to save me. But where was I better off? With Goro facing termination for traitorous behavior or here?

\* \* \* \*

"Commander, you're receiving a low energy encrypted message encoded with official voice signature from *The Mediator*," the pod-fighter computer announced while coursing through deep space in search of Darla's captors.

Communication from The Cause's command starship? Not surprising. I haven't shaved in weeks. I've abandoned my command to chase an Earth woman deemed volatile by every other crew member who has crossed her path. And command actually waited weeks to contact me? How illuminating can this message be? "Translate."

"Commander Goro, it is with great regret I send this message. In regards to Voldon's latest endeavor to recover the Bramyllion Crystal Skulls hidden on earth, your command has been filled by a worthy member who can participate in operations to save free thinkers on that sacred planet. But your problems are much greater with Voldon's announcement of his child. Find Darla. If she proves guilty of espionage, terminate her. When your mission returns you to us, I will vouch for your worthiness and attempt to reinstate your command. Yours is a determination The Cause rarely finds. Love and light, my friend. Commander Arken."

Not the head of the Free World Council sending me a highly questionable message. There was a reason nobody communicated with pod fighters for fear of revealing a were-assassin's location. Whatever was behind Arken's judgement had to be serious. And Voldon's sudden focus on finding the last three crystal skulls indicated he thought free-thinking defenses guarding earth lacking. Because I abandoned my post. Because the woman I chose to mate might be an infiltrator.

My gut twisted.

Luring me away from my ship was probably Voldon's plan all along. Did the Council

label me as incompetent now? Has Destiny woven this failure along my path to teach me a lesson?

I've failed.

At least they hadn't ordered me to return the pod fighter. My rank had secured me the machine. And the pod fighter was the only means by which Darla could be located. Arken would have known that much. Given the Council had allowed me to keep my transportation, they must be allowing me some leniency. Therein, some type of duty rang strong.

Duty was duty.

And exceptions lie in the definition of duty. Like saving the woman of my choice might be the Council's way to ensure I mate soon.

However, my reputation was tarnished as black as the leather clothes on my back and the hair I don't have time to shave because I man a pod fighter instead of shave and watch over my crew. Every accursed thing about my choices reeks that I shirked my duty.

So, I lose my crew.

Have I lost my mate?

Now I will reclaim what's salvageable of my honor. One way or the other.

\* \* \* \*

Days blurred into unending wake cycles for Darla in her state of containment inside the boring empty Crellon ship without time cycles in the ship's lighting. Time had abandoned me to this Destiny of captivity far from Goro, she concluded. So out of his reach. But not the aliens. Oh no. I was never left unobserved.

I'm so screwed. It's only a matter of time.

The Crellons seemed more cautious of me after the flying-crate incident. However, they had no inhibitions about who was in the room when they felt like fucking. And my cell was part of their open room concept centered around their bridge—one big central room for fornicating.

Oh how Crellons felt like pumping and grinding.

And that activity occurred on average fourteen times a day. There was little else to do but wait while the dolts operated in a world of mindspeak as I sat on the periphery like a caged rat. So torturing them with projectiles really was the only pastime for a prisoner.

Let's call it justice served, universe. Why do I even bother talking to you, universe? You never answer. I'm so pathetic. I talk to something that can't be personified because it's impossible for it to reply or react. I so need to get out of here. Here is another cool subject. Why am I here? I'm being punished. Yep. That's it. I get Hell in space for defying my parents with the porn flicks. I shifted a leg, watching the scuffed toe of my black boot rock a bit before stilling where it thrust off the only piece of furniture, my immobile cot.

The Crellon boys had wizened up a bit and removed anything that wasn't anchored to something or bolted down those things that could be anchored. Now, life was merely a thought process.

My days were lost to thoughts of escape and leverage. Since the Crellon sex fiends realized I was psychokinetic, they had to wonder how they'd snuff my power and trade me for the goods. Or they were stuck with me. By the looks of their predicament with wrenches and a welding torch, they'd have to find someone who could manage my lesser-evolved skill. Only one name came to mind. Voldon. The man behind my bounty.

What would Voldon do to me when I fell into his clutches?

Tweedle Big Nuts swung his family jewels with each of his footsteps toward my cell and stopped a smidge shy of the bars.



Not the most treasured penthouse view. But where could a prisoner hide? This containment area wasn't anything like the ones on *The Seeker*. The bars didn't glow. Nor did they sizzle when a person touched them. Crellon cells were inexpensive yet fully functional. But why would psychics need low maintenance equipment? These jerk offs probably only had a two-man crew of which neither member could be in meditative state at any given time to run their ship. So, these boys needed fuel. I slid my gaze up from the alien's tanned washboard abs to his white gaze.

Fuel could blow up things. *Hmm*. What a girl could do with explosives.

He stood there staring me down as if he'd had enough of my telekinetic antics.

Or wanted to ram right into me.

*Ugh*. We are so not on the same page.

Go find Do-Me Daisy. But certainly that point was a given.

"You redirect the pod fighter by handing over me command of ship," he managed in butchered English as if speaking with his mouth and English were absolutely foreign to him.

Oh, very funny first point to utter when he finally lowers himself to speaking with his mouth. My only means of escape was mine—amazingly unique pod fighter. No deal. "Go fuck your friends." Good thing I had a lot of time practicing to be Crazy Bitch Darla. Selling flowers truly didn't prepare a girl for space life.

His eyes pinched with thought. "Cooperate or suffer."

Let me tell you, universe, I'm not scared of this jerk off. "So who's going to make me? You and your *handy* man? Where's Voldon? I'd love to see his face when I arrive with all the tales of what you tried to do to me. After all, I am his mate."

Those pinched white eyes widened slightly. The alien's gaze slid to his partner. Their suddenly suspicious gazes locked as if they spoke in mindspeak.

Apparently, they hadn't heard the rumor about the baby. What played out in those minds? Would they decide to have their way with me somehow and kill me afterward? Or was the pod fighter too great of a treasure to worry about killing Voldon's mate? Destiny sure had a way of shafting a girl. Just snatch away my love-sworn mate's trust and throw me into a sex pit. I was a fool for believing somewhere in the universe there was a place for me. A place I could live happily.

Tweedle Big Penis swung his elephant trunk over to claim a spot beside Tweedle Big Nuts and locked a poker-face stare on me. "Hand over pod fighter, and I let go wherever you say."

What kind of deal was that from the lusty duo? Voldon's bounty had to be sweet. Throw in the exchange rate of a pod fighter and certainly these guys were headed for first class retirement. I'd be a fool to lose my wild card. After all, they obviously wanted the spacecraft more than Voldon's reward. And the only way I could get back to Earth was with the pod fighter. "The pod fighter is mine. And, you touch one hair on my head, I promise Voldon will make your life a nightmare."

The Crellons glanced between each other and turned away.

Mindspeak sure could leave an Earth girl wondering what in the Hell was going on. But that same frustration is what got me trapped by bounty hunters. Time to think differently. I have to hang on and find a way to escape. Just how much longer will this damned flight back to Voldon take? Goro obviously isn't in pursuit to save me. Nobody was. I'm here, somewhere, heading deeper into nowhere faster than the speed of light.

Sadly, this is my fault.

I jumped the gun, universe. I shouldn't have gotten so angry with Goro. I should have had more faith in him. God, to turn back the clock and just sit and wait for him to think of something. To believe him. But how could I know he would do anything other than throw me in detention? He hadn't seemed anxious to shackle me though. I should have been more patient. If only should have could pop the lock on this door.

Unfortunately, this reality was about space travel. Not time travel.

\* \* \* \*

Hair itched Goro's neck where he laid in the dark cockpit of his pod fighter, still trying to catch up with his love-sworn mate. He strained his neck to pull back his long hair and tie it into a queue in the faint orange lighting while he waited for his computer to report.

Three months had passed. Three extremely long months full of last-ditch efforts to trace the Crellon's chaotic hopping from planet to solar system and beyond through wormholes. What they were doing was a mystery. Nobody really understood slavers. They were like parasites. Perhaps they were on the path of better rewards, collecting as many as possible as they followed some unpredictable route to Voldon.

Shuttling Darla farther and farther away.

What if she really was a sex spy? Planted in my lap. What if I have been led through space on this sexual espionage hunt for nothing more than Voldon wanted to get me away from earth?

"Commander, the Crellon ship has stopped moving."

A chill tickled gooseflesh along my arms.

We're that close? "How long will it take you to reach the spacecraft?"

"Approximately, twelve earth minutes."

The distance between Darla's captors and my pod fighter had shrunk from days to minutes. Blessed Devros, give me the upper hand. Would I find Darla a traitor? She was more than a weapon of revenge. She was extremely intelligent and wielded extraordinary psychic powers. Just the kind of war slave Voldon might find useful. Throw in her beauty and the thirteen crystal skulls, the free-thinking universe didn't stand a chance.

Time to find out if her allegiance lay with Voldon. I'll end her life if it does. Finding her, testing her, those were the things that will prove these truths above all else. I yanked the tie out of my hair.

Xquine warriors preferred being unencumbered during combat.

But how do I test her without losing my life in handing over my blood to Voldon? Mating is the only way. The truth of her allegiance lay in my blood libation. And if she proved a traitor, I'd sacrifice myself for The Cause. Unfortunately if she were innocent, I'd have to lie about my purpose until I had proof.

\* \* \* \*

A blast jolted the Crellon vessel's wall behind Darla's back, sending her to her feet. What was that, she wondered. An explosion?

The Tweedles scrambled, opening locked compartments.

Damn. Looking for handy projectiles undoubtedly. Maybe I can work up some wind to relieve them of those lovely telekinetic harpoons. I smiled, drew my thoughts inward, and conjured up some motion.

"Stop," Tweedle Big Nuts shouted my direction.

Like I would given I was safely tucked behind metal bars. So much for Crellons thinking outside the box.

A long metallic object flew out of Tweedle Big Penis' hand.  
Since he wasn't masturbating before the explosion, one could safely say the object was as metallic as the sound it made when it hit the far wall.  
Potentially germ free.  
The long object shot toward me.  
I held out a hand and grabbed the hard metal.  
Another blast thundered.  
Shrapnel shot across the room.  
Bits flew between the bars of my cell like a dust cloud mushrooming to choke oxygen from the space. The billowing debris spat out a dark male humanoid with long flowing black hair.  
In the way he clubbed the Crellons, nobody needed to guess whether he was a Crellon himself. Unless he was a jilted lover. Now, that was a possibility. Who else would enter this sexually-transmitted-disease-coated tub without disinfectant? This disgusting spacecraft had to be tagged with some sort of marking that warned normal extraterrestrials to stay away or risk infection.  
All the Crellons stopped moving where they were sprawled out on the floor.  
Were they dead? Three cheers for the humanoid tank.  
The warrior with the long hair disarmed the Crellon bodies, taking objects similar to the one that I held, then hunted around the control panel beyond the whirling smoke tendrils.  
My creaking cell door popped open.  
Does he know I'm here or my identity? Was he releasing me or capturing me to exchange for the bounty? In the end, nothing could be worse than being captive by Crellons.  
The man turned to me and walked lazily through the lingering haze he'd created.  
Step by casual step. All muscles.  
Something about him looked familiar. Maybe it was the way he walked. Or his mercenary-style black leather?  
"You're free, Darla."  
That deep patient almost threatening whisper of a voice sent chills down my spine. Like I thought I'd ever hear Goro speak again.

## Chapter Six

Darla's heart hammered as she stared at the strangely improved Goro. He was unbelievably gorgeous, she noted. Wild. And he'd blown his way aboard to save me. Or to recapture me to return me to The Cause for trial as a traitor. He'd beaten the Crellons unconscious in the process. What do I do? Run? Or kiss him for saving me? How am I going to keep from throwing my arms around him?

He strode to the cell's entrance and halted.

And stared. He was so different now. So uninhibited with his long hair. Without his standard black jacket-like cape, in his leather vest and pants he was equally formidable. Rugged.

My knees wobbled.

Take care, Darla. He's trouble. There's a good half of the universe out there questioning your allegiance. But this beastly barbarian was much more than the neatly-suited commander. What else had changed? "Goro?"

He nodded.

Just once was all he chose to gift me. Enough to see those orange eyes from a different angle. The same smoldering eyes sparking with fire. Just whose cause had he come to rescue me for? Who could turn away from the sheen on his sweaty muscles and the fireworks in his eyes? What a barbarian on steroids.

He could drag me anywhere by the hair.

Why did *take me now* block every thought in my mind? Crazy Darla, think of something to save my ass. "So much time had passed. I figured I had been left to the Crellons. Especially after the rumor started."

"Come out, Darla. We must leave now."

What a temptation magnet. But this ship was so n-a-s-t-y. Entering the realm of STDs was far more risky than patiently awaiting death by starvation isolated in a lovely somewhat-sterile cell. And who knew how deadly extraterrestrial STDs were.

His black eyebrows flat lined. "We won't be staying. I want to lock these fools up before we depart though. So, please clear the containment cell."

He sounded so normal. But his unruly look would do me in. What else can I do? I've got to play along and wait for another window of opportunity. Be smart. Stay on my toes. I strode through the bars, careful not to touch anything, and stepped through a layer of crunching ship pieces covering the floor until I stood beside the hole where the door he blasted away once opened and closed.

The sound of dragging bodies whispered how Goro stashed the Crellon lovers in their very own precious honeymoon cabin.

Oh to bolt to my pod fighter and get the heck out of this crab-infested-venereal-disease nightmare. Wherever the spacecraft was. After waking up from the sleeping gas incident behind bars, leaving the containment area never proved wise. I have no idea where my pod fighter was.

Goro did. He knew all about this universe. The man was my ticket back home. But what did he want? And why the change in hairstyles all of a sudden? Did he hit some crazy phase of life where men from his world sprout long locks?

Oh to run my fingers through the symbol of his new phase of life. I almost turned to read clues in his facial expression. But then I'd have to struggle with my renewed attraction to him. Not good since I just needed to climb up through the deepest rungs of Hell to find my way back to Earth. Or some kind of normalcy.

And nothing about Goro looked normal. He needed to just grab me by the ponytail. Drag me off. Take advantage of me. Goro now had the raw appearance of a man with no inhibitions. Thank the stars he grew up. And who didn't want a big tough guy ready to defend or pounce her? That's if he intended to pounce. I've got to play this game right. Whether Goro believes it or not, I still have my virginity bartering chip. And this hunk of a genius knew how to use a pod fighter.

Brains, brawn, and sex appeal.

What a hero.

Look out, universe. I get a chance at him first. Okay, maybe a second chance. And he probably knows where my pod fighter is.

A clank noted the cell door's lock was engaged.

Goro's form halted beside her, in the doorframe.

Correction, inside the blast-hole's edge of raw sharp metal. If Goro wasn't careful, he'd scratch up all those bulging arm muscles. Talk about a tragedy when all a girl wanted to do was rub her palms over all of that hot supple iron. Mold it into a new groaning moaning twisted mass of uncontrolled cooperative male.

Oh the power of a few dirty movies. I was such an impressionable teen.

"Let's take the pod fighters, Darla. Command yours to match my moves. I don't want to lose you again."

Yeah. Yeah. Don't lose the emperor's dream babe. He still talked like a commander. Hopefully Conan wanted me as much as Voldon did. I followed Goro's shadow in the low level lighting.

"How long has it been?" I asked.

He headed through a narrow empty passageway toward a hatch. "Three earth months."

An entire season? Geesh, talk about imprisonment. And now I've been saved by Conan. Or was I? Pay attention self. *He didn't react thrilled to see me at all.*

Just what does he want with me?

Goro led me into a docking bay where our pod fighters waited.

He had said next to nothing. "Where are we going?"

He shot me a curious glance.

"Why are you rescuing me?"

"You are my responsibility." He just waited, staring at me, the formidable killing machine.

That stern jaw line. Those scrutinizing eyes. His wild hair. He just stood there.

My knees quaked as my core melted.

If this ain't one-hundred percent possession, what is? Responsibility rang a good solid motive to cough up though. But just what did responsibility refer to? Am I his responsibility to return to The Cause because I've been labeled a traitor?

Buying into the packaging of a man that made me run into danger while my knees liquefied was nuts. But he was so off-the-scale gorgeous now. If he'd just insist on having sex. If he'd just take what he had claimed to desire all those years. If only he'd give me that one chance to exchange blood and attach my soul to his for eternity.

Lord, I'm losing my mind. Now apparently wasn't the time for *ifs* or opening up a direct line to God to confess my flaws. I blinked, pushed the secret button on my pod fighter to open the hatch, and climbed into the welcoming isolation of my pod's cockpit.

"Remember, follow me, Darla. I'm taking you back to earth."

Why earth? That could be either good or bad. "Why?" I waited for any hint of answers to dance in his orange eyes.

"There's no time to talk." He climbed into his cockpit and closed the hatch.

Fine. I can follow him back to earth. It's not like he was begging to become soul mates any longer. Earth is the perfect place we can go our separate ways. At least going our separate ways meant I'd be alive.

\* \* \* \*

The Crellon ship's lighting faded almost instantly as Goro's cockpit sealed out the overhead docking bay illumination. Although Darla was safer than she'd been in months, for the moment, anything could happen in Quadrant Three, he thought. This quadrant offered little in free-thinking sanctuaries. We could fly under the radar for the most part. But bounty hunters would always be a problem. Pod fighters translated into were-assassins to Voldon's operatives.

Ironically, all of Voldon's plans work for him. No one lived as fortunate an existence as Voldon. His power stretched across the universe, invaded even the minutest molecule with the catastrophic freedom like that of unavoidable radiation. And everywhere the mad man's energy touched, someone assisted him.

Who? Maybe, just maybe, Voldon's sex spy. Could I even blame her for taking up the charismatic emperor on one of his offers? People did all too often to protect other people. Loved ones. Nobles were the first to buckle. I just expected Darla to be stronger.

Was she innocent or as guilty as Voldon? At least, she was safe for the moment. Until it came down to my honor and her betrayal. "Computer, take us to Ruvini." We'll spend one night there to spare our cramping legs the long journey to Quadrant Three's wormhole relay. Hopefully, Darla's pod fighter would follow mine. If Darla didn't, well that was proof she was a sex spy. And I'd just hunt her down and kill her.

By the time we stepped onto Ruvini's sandy beach, the green waves consumed so much of the beach line that they had to retreat from the high tide among the caves in the rocky cliffs. The orange sunset bore through the large cavern's high ceiling and painted the shadows with a white opacity that even a torch couldn't burn away.

Darla walked silently before me in my shadow cast where the sunlight bore into a cave. The light attempted to reveal something. Or at least point out the way she carried herself was the same as my were-mate crew members. She held her shoulders high with dignity. What did her self-assurance indicate?

Had I made the biggest mistake The Cause could suffer bringing her aboard *The Seeker*? I fed her information about everyone aboard the ship, including were-assassins. She was most likely the leak I thought Sevrà to be. Had I erred in judging Sevrà guilty? Not likely. Since Darla's mind couldn't be read, Voldon would have required someone to work with Darla. Someone like Sevrà. And Sevrà's mate had been caught talking to Voldon while remote viewing. So the guilty were judged nonetheless.

Adding guilt to the day's troubles was foolish though. Since when was life about ease? Sevrà deserved her end in her suspicious behavior. Life was about choices. And the most harrowing of choices hovered steps away. Will she prove my reward or my torture? My command or my mate? Hopefully both led to honor.

What would her body communicate now if she offered it? It's request for completion? Or would those curves lead me deeper into Voldon's intricate trap of enslavement? Zombification wasn't good. But would a person even realize he no longer thought for himself?

Fear. I have to stop thinking about what might be and just deal with the moment. But fear has a way of infecting one's soul. And an exalted life was all about overcoming fear. Time to begin the test. "Let's sleep here."

Darla twirled and bent her knees, descending into a sitting position with a scrutinizing gaze anchored on me. "Why are you taking me to earth?" The question burst from her as if she held her breath the entire forty-three hour trip in order to ensure she wouldn't forget to ask.

Noting Voldon's crystal skull dilemma might not be in The Cause's favor until Darla's allegiance was clarified since Voldon wanted the skulls. "I'm taking you home."

Her mask pinched into confusion. "Why?"

Maybe sticking with duty was best. "I took you from earth. I'm returning you. No wrong will be left between us."

Her jaw dropped. "You're kidding? After what we've been through? Dammit, Goro! I'm in love with you. And you're going to let Voldon's lies work against that? What about all that Destiny crap you espouse? I may not be as bright as you, but I can see through Voldon's game." She rose, assuming a checkmate stance, daring me to doubt her.

Spoken like a master sex spy with her declaration of love. Or is my fear of self-preservation gnawing at my soul? And Blessed Devros knows fear kills a soul. Self-preservation is one of the most basic forms of fear. Subconscious. Involuntary. And Voldon would see me dead. As would irrational desires like lust. Until I discount sexual espionage, I'm better off lying to stay alive. Or I fail Destiny. "I told you I believe you." Although, lying is another aspect of fear. I stared her down, daring her to debate.

She straightened her spine, her long legs stretching out her black leather pants to an incredible limit.

Oh to have those legs latch tightly around me while I suckled at those buxom breasts like a babe. Just give me a few minutes. Just a few...

She stretched one step toward me. And another. "I told you I love you, Goro. Doesn't that mean anything?" Her boots ground cave debris with her approach.

The bits of tell-tale rock blanketing the pitted cave floor only forewarned a traitor lurked with their almost silent whisper.

But Darla kept coming. The intruder. The infiltrator. The imposter.

Those breasts edged toward me. And those memories from all those times I held those delightfully stimulating soft mounds hidden beneath her sleeveless leather shirt with both of my hands. Handfuls of treasure. Both always begged for my touch. Rather she did the way she leaned into my grasp. I should have taken what I needed from them long ago. Enjoyed what I could long before Voldon announced the child. I would have had plenty of time to enjoy mating back then. But therein lay the twist of Destiny where a man learned how he was deemed worthy through his reward. And my worthiness is apparently still under debate.

She greedily snatched the last step before me, pausing those bulging breasts millimeters from my chest.

How does a man turn away from what he's dreamed about for years? It's a pity lust and desire didn't rank up there with loyalty.

"I've done everything you ever asked of me," she gently whispered.

Mistake number one. "I never asked you to run from me on Vek." Who's the master

manipulator now?

She winced and looked away for a moment but locked her gaze back on mine. "I was afraid."

Nobody can escape fear, it builds up like a tidal wave and smothers your sanity. Every Xquine child learned this early in life. But she stood before me, an earthling. "Life is about the choices we make."

Her eyes squeezed shut. She minutely shook her head. "I know!" Her gaze anchored back on mine. "I made a mistake." She planted her palms firmly against my chest, enhancing that incredibly enthralling cleavage. "I realized back on that Crellon ship that I should never have left you."

All my blood drained to my manhood.

The enchantress. If she played the traitor, she would die. If I could manage to return her for justice before falling under Voldon's spell.

My loin throbbed in Darla's defense.

Why is it so difficult to leave one's inner beast in the pod fighter? Oh yes. Life would be too easy. I shifted my footing, trying to inconspicuously reposition my *arousal*, gazing into her brown eyes, searching the dark depths for something therein that would reveal her true purpose.

"I'll be damned if you don't let me prove my love for you, Goro."

Her hands slid up my chest as the roundness of her breasts pressed so deeply into me that they'd certainly burst from her shirt. Dare I move? I might lose my mind and all self control.

Her fingers tickled across my jaw, pulling my lips down to hers.

Where can a man run from such a beauty? But warriors don't run. Strength to think this through, to make the right decision this time, would be my salvation.

Her warm soft lips fluttered as if whispering, teasing me from afar.

What those lips would feel like against my skin.

My manhood lunged.

Accursed animal.

She leaned forward, pressing her velvet lips against mine. The moist silk of her tongue pried my lips apart.

My gut dove off into the unknown.

Or was that my soul? Had she broken through my palisade so quickly? But what was wrong with letting go? Testing her for the greater good of humanity? If she proved innocent of espionage, I would have a mate. And who wouldn't welcome an intelligent caring woman into his bed as a soul mate? It wasn't as if I fed the beast that hungered within. I simply proved whether or not I made the biggest mistake of my career by bringing an infiltrator among innocents fighting for The Cause. And there was only way to clear my name. The test. I rubbed my hands down her slim firm back and across the warm leather covering the tight curve of her ass.

She threw her head back and gasped, running her palm across my chest. "Take off your shirt."

Would Darla prove the blessed virgin promised to the last Xquine or the greatest weapon in sexual espionage? There was only one way to learn this truth. Duty. And I owed The Cause that much for bringing a potential traitor aboard *The Seeker* and into the fold. I ran both palms across her firm ass and squeezed those sweet buttocks.

She clung to me, groaning. Waiting. Begging.

And who could refuse the hungry a morsel? Whether the temptation lay in suicide or



Destiny, I opened my mouth and devoured her demanding lips.

Her anxious fingers wove into my hair, pulling, drawing me down to where we knelt upon the hard rock of Ruvini.

For The Cause. I ran my hands down her leg and along her inner thigh until I could cup her mound in the palm of one hand.

Therein lay my demise or reward. Regardless of the outcome, I was going to enjoy taking what I'd been waiting for. At long last. Even if it is my final conscious action. I pulled her crotch against my waist where I sat until her luscious breasts bulged in my face.

Dare I milk truth from that bosom?

She arched her tight body against my waist and wrapped her arms around my neck, attempting to draw me into her the way I had contemplated protecting her moments before.

"I knew you loved me," she sighed. "Take off that accursed leather." Her hands toyed with my sanity by slithering away.

She began pulling her shirt over her head.

Undressing. What an idea. The way I sweated, I'd be slithering in my clothing soon enough.

But to yank my shirt over my head meant I wouldn't see the unveiling of what I'd waited so long to see. How foolish. Just to cradle those promises of love and life, to milk light into my existence.

Her breasts fell free.

Sacred.

Nipples tight like my father's berries begging for harvest. And Father so encouraged his son to harvest nature's bounty. I yanked my shirt over my head and reached for the exquisite sweetness promised in one of those precious nubs, but paused.

To touch it meant there was no turning back from the ultimate aphrodisiac. His hands on them equated to a sign of acceptance. Eternal love or suicide.

Gods to taste of her.

To drain her heart of any lingering resistance. Prove her innocence. And what would become of me if there were no peace in knowing truth? Destiny might be little more than wishful thinking.

"Dear God, Goro, stop torturing me with promises. I want your hands on me." Her hips begged, rocking against me.

Now, the universe's sentient beings would know if legends speaking of Destiny had any validity. I lowered my thumb to the softest skin, skin like the finest worked leather, the kind only the wealthiest people in the universe could wear given laws regulating the number of youngling Tertian Volars that could be slaughtered for their hides. Nipples. Glorious fountains of light.

Her head rolled backward, then side to side where she stretched backward at arm's length from the grip she held on my shoulders.

Oh she liked my touch.

The waning golden sunset cut through the cave's shadows to gild the throbbing pulse in her neck.

"I need you, Goro."

The way she rocked her groin against me only stoked my own unforgiving need. I ran a thumb across the tautly-wrinkled skin of her aureole. To that wondrous pebbled pearl. A tap into the mysteries of the universe.

To sip deeply from that divine well. I leaned over, and sucked the tip until my tongue seduced the full length of it into my mouth.

Her hands thrust into his hair. She purred and yanked at her grasp like passing over the universe's knowledge was painful.

So much for interrogating the spy. Only a fool would shave the rope to which a woman clung to reality.

My manhood thrashed for release.

I wanted to throw her down, rip off her pants, and plant Destiny's seeds inside her womb. How ironic I ran from my father's farming legacy only to return full circle to sow and harvest.

The other luscious nipple begged for equal attention. I trailed the tip of my tongue down then up her tender swells to the other delightful bead and latched on to fill myself with life's essence.

What was life before two handfuls of breast?

"Are you trying to kill me, Goro?" she groaned. "I want you inside me now." She shoved away from me, pushing with great force to unlatch my mouth from her nipple, rising to remove her boots and kick off her pants.

Justice did exist in the universe.

Her naked body was all over me where I stood, following her example. Her hands pulled at any clothing I hadn't focused upon with a determination that couldn't be anything other than raw need.

And how the beast craved raw need.

## Chapter Seven

If Darla didn't peel those pants off her barbarian's iron body, she was going to die. The most horrible death, she noted. One of a sex-starved female. Brushing her skin against his warm muscled biceps and vest weren't good enough. She wanted to rake her nipples against his. Just to see how it'd feel.

At last, his body responded to mine so intimately that he couldn't decline my proposal. I had to keep him focused. Keep him distracted before he thought up another reason to postpone the consummation of our marital bond. Or I was destined for termination. A virgin. How tragic.

Having a real man was moments away. Had to be. Here gasped grasped one in the throes of commitment without a fear in the world. A breast man. I leaned into his solid accommodating body, raked my stiff nipples from his ribs to the rounded points on his chest, and circled his nibs with my own.

Chills jolted through my core.

Gods this is better than porn flicks. At last I understood what all the taunts about feeling wet meant.

He grabbed my hair, yanking my head so far back I feared my neck would pop.

Is this where Goro takes out Voldon's alleged spy? I rolled my eyes to the farthest limit. To where he knelt.

He reached for one of my nipples and tugged at it, mesmerized, rolling the tender flesh between his thumb and index finger. His hot moist mouth bent down like he took one last drag on a cigarette and savored the moment before tossing the butt in the trash to quit cold turkey.

Throw me down. I'm all yours, Conan.

Tingly hot breath blew across my nipple.

*I need him inside me.* Now. "Goro!"

His orange gaze slowly slid from my breast, up my neck, stalled at my lips, then ventured on to meet my eyes. An eerie glow burned in those orbs as if he were no longer there. As if something more basal and carnal arose from the depths within him to take over for mating.

Just take me.

Who cared if this was normal in were-mating? Things were going to be different going into this long-term relationship with blood exchanges. No divorce allowed. But nobody warned me he might become a beast beforehand. Who cared? He was ten times sexier. So sexy I couldn't think of anything but those shots in the smut movies where they got close-ups of the thick cock pounding between a woman's thighs. Wouldn't he hurry to prove everything I imagined was so much more in real life? He just needed a little incentive. I reached down to fondle myself like all the women in those sex shows.

"I'll do that." His grip on my hair let go, and he lifted me into his arms only to slowly lower me onto the cold ground. Then his tickling fingertips investigated my groin.

Oh to breathe as his fingers claimed every inch of my sensitive nether folds and clit only to move lower and slide inside me. To tease me.

I thrashed against the planet's cold rock.

"You're so wet," he growled.

His eyes seemed so distant. So different as if the demon contemplated something. Or was lost. I'll help him. I raised a hand to his cheek to pull down his lips again. To guide him to me.

And the way the iron cording throbbed in his neck promised of the blood binding. I ran a fingertip along the confessing artery.

His heart thumped a demand for consummation.

Not a problem given he thrust his fingers inside my aching body.

Wouldn't he take me completely? I couldn't lie still, squirming against those teasing fingers.

And then there was where the sweat beaded among the hairs on his chest. I rubbed the moisture into his drumming heart. Down. Down into the shadows. Over his ribbed abdomen. Down to where someone needed to guide his hard shaft into where it could throb inside me. I pulled his cock into the waning sunlight.

The tip glowed just as orange as the sunset.

Uh. Why is his penis glowing? I slid my gaze to meet my lover's orange eyes.

His fingers stilled inside me. "It's anatomically correct for an Xquine male. If you're afraid, we can stop."

The familiar tone reminded me Goro was still there, buried beneath his Conan facade.

Unchanged.

Just sexually willing.

Well, so, what's the problem? We won't get lost in the dark. Nothing was getting in the way of this moment. I reached up, snaked my arms around his shoulders to gain the best angle at sliding them down his back, dropped my knees left and right to the cave floor, and pulled two handfuls of his muscled ass toward me.

"Hurry," I insisted.

His fingers slid from inside me. He inhaled deeply, almost calculatingly, shoved a hand up under one of my knees, and then the other until I was solidly locked, positioned exactly where he wanted, core ready, at his mercy. "I have dreamed of nothing but this every night you weren't in my bed, heart of my heart."

That very same organ, my heart, melted into a pile of mush.

If he would only thrust himself inside me.

The tightness in the way he pinned me down only made me ache unbelievably between my legs. I needed him. My pelvis rocked wildly, uncontrollably. As much as it could the way I was pinned in position.

He watched my involuntary movements as if fascinated by the way my body instinctively wanted him.

His cock lurched, a strange beacon in its glowing state.

God I'm going to die. "Goro." I reached for his shaft.

He swatted my hand away. "Don't touch me, Darla. I need to do this my way."

If that's what it takes to get fucked around here. Maybe I watched one too many sex shows. I bit my tongue to keep my crude comments to myself and laid back.

Since he was a breast man, a little seduction might help. I cupped each breast with a handful of fingers.

He watched, mesmerized, shoving his hands up higher beneath my knees.

"Come to me, Goro."

He descended a male lost deeply in thought. Coming so close. The tips of his black hair

dangled down to my skin, stealing my breath away with almost non-existent caresses.

My entire body hummed with chills.

When would he show me what love was like? Oh, the madness of this mating ritual.

He leaned toward my lips, the dragging hairs tickling across my ribs.

Oh for a merciful breath of air.

The smooth head of his cock pushed into the moist cleft between my legs, pushing delicious pleasure inside me, until causing pressure.

He suddenly stopped, staring into my eyes.

Like his cock couldn't find where it needed to go. "Let me help you." I began to reach.

"No," he growled. "The pleasure lies in the waiting," he purred an inch from my nose.

The second time with the same voice he always used. Low. Seductive.

His hot lips settled against mine. Inhaled the last breath from my lungs. Melted my soul.

He rammed his hard shaft along my inner channel. Effortlessly. Sinking his full hardness so deeply until his the root of his shaft nudged against me in the most provocative manner.

A little fire tingled into a burn.

Was that all the pain I would feel this first time? I needed to rock my body. I needed him to rock his body. I just needed someone to make the planet shift its poles. So I could be on top. Or something. My hips wanted to take over. But there was no room to budge, locked where Goro wanted them. Well, why wasn't he doing anything? He closed his eyes.

Alien rituals or not. "This is no time to meditate," I tried to whisper calmly instead of irritably.

His eyelids flicked open, flashing those burning circles at me.

Something danced in those rings of fire. Something incredibly addictive. Something I never wanted anyone else to see. *God, he could have anything he wanted.*

"I can't hold back any longer," he warned.

"Thank the stars. I'll die if you don't bury yourself inside me."

He shoved the tender heaviness of his torso away from my ribs, arching his hips backward until his elbows fully opened.

How glorious. How raw. How powerful. Nothing would compare to having him inside me. "Hurry." I wagged my hips as much as possible around the solid shaft teasing me with complete domination.

What a lifeline to him. We were one now.

Something began to fill the space deep inside me with a substantial presence. Kind of like a massaging sensation. The massage shifted to a tickle. All over inside me. Stealing my breath again. I just wanted to wrap my legs around Goro's waist and squirm all over his supple muscles until I could suddenly manage to inhale. I arched my neck and tried to breathe, clenching my inner muscles tight to try to control the overwhelming sensation.

"Be patient, Darla. I promise to hurry," he whispered in his Goro tone.

If he was a virgin because he hadn't mated according to legend, I needed to implement some more porn flick tricks. "Let me go. Up. I want on top. Or anything you want. Just let me do it." Or I'll die.

"Not until you learn how to have safe sex."

Safe sex? What's dangerous when you're supposed to get pregnant? "Uh, doesn't safe sex counteract the legend about our child?"

He shut his eyes, wagged his head, and rammed into me. Forcefully pulling his precious

hardness out a few inches, and plunging it back to stroke my soul. Teasing me but driving me insane with so much force, everywhere inside my core. To the ends of every nerve in my body.

No one ever said sex could be this satisfying. I craned my neck until I felt pain. Delicious, mind-numbing pain that helped me forget about the rapture he made me feel. Just to watch my barbarian's body dance its powerful alien dance. Like he paid homage to my body. His movements bewitched me until my neck refused to support my head. Until the fading sunlight burned my eyes. And all I could do was grit my teeth to keep from groaning with my eyelids clamped tight. I wanted to tell him faster, harder, and how amazing it felt. But words wouldn't form in my mouth.

Words.

What were words with an Xquine pumping you full of the most incredible ecstasy? I couldn't hold back my cries any longer.

My screams were enough to convey my emotions.

Father was so wrong. This wasn't Hell. Heaven was attainable by the living. I tried to reach for my heaven. To hold onto something tangible in such an intangible moment of struggling for breath and a firm supple touch of the iron body taking me higher.

My hands landed on his stiff solid arms.

His flesh and bone jolted beneath my palms as he squeezed out a moan.

He plunged again, pushing my mind beyond reason.

I'll die if he stops. The way he nudged pleasure from my body and touched my very soul. Something about his anatomy had to have taken the shape of my womb. It rammed and rubbed me so intimately beyond belief.

My screams howled around the cave's stone walls.

He lunged deeper and deeper until I thought he'd split me in two, then he suddenly roared.

A dark territorial jungle sound.

His body went so goddamned amazingly rigid.

Something pulsed the most incredibly perfect sensation deep within my trembling body. I managed to push out some squeaky sounds that conveyed my pleasure to him as my body jerked with each electric throb he planted inside me.

Talk about life in deep space. I'd finally found it.

His pulses slowly eased until Goro leaned over me and locked those rings of fire on my gaze. "Love and light, heart of my heart." He settled down on the stone pulling my body next to his slick hot skin.

Thank the stars, he wanted me close. How could another minute pass without him by my side? At least he was still inside me. Still part of me.

His shaft pulsed with only a heartbeat now.

A steady reminder that we were finally together, whole. Complete. Life was now so miraculously perfect. If only we could do that again. And nipples were just the aphrodisiac he needed. I tried to roll into his sweaty chest. To wrap my arms around my mate. To press my nipples into his heart. Or suck on his.

"Careful," he gasped, holding my leg bent strategically around his thigh. "It will take a while before we are free to separate." He planted a gentle kiss on my forehead. "Safe sex, heart of my heart."

So something beyond the transfer of sperm is what he had referred to with safe sex. Oh well. When a girl finally got her guy, she just needed to sit back and enjoy the trophy for a

while. I cuddled up beneath his arm and ran a hand over his washboard ribs. “You,” I met his curious gaze, “didn’t tell me everything.”

“Would you have believed me if I described my penis changing shape or the bioluminescence? And the extended period of attachment?” He rubbed his cheek across my forehead. “Although, I didn’t really want to scare you away before you tasted the experience.”

So he feared I’d shy away from the strange encounter? Not after that surf-and-turf dinner. “I knew that coming into this relationship things would be different from what I was familiar with on earth. You have to agree I’m just a little open-minded.” I studied the vein bulging along the length of his upper arm.

A chuckle deep inside his chest threatened to echo around the cave. “Oh, little one, you’ve skinned my crew members alive with the simplest objects you can turn into projectiles, you’ve participated in the longest wait for marriage I’ve ever seen, and you’ve managed to survive encounters with Voldon and Crellon slavers.” He tickled a finger beneath my chin and lifted my gaze to meet his. “You’ve donned knives and learned to use them in self-imposed isolation. Then you welcomed me today, soul bared to the universe. If there is one thing the universe will resonate with for all time is the memory of your open-mindedness.”

They’d have to when I had such an insane legend to contend with.

He rolled his warmth backward a bit, reached for his limp penis, and smiled. “There we go,” he sighed as if his movement was painful.

His presence slid from inside me.

Leaving. No. It was all I could do to bite back my complaints.

He laid there, observing me with his typical Goro mask. His normal-looking shaft hung over his thigh as if it had earned a rest.

Girls back home used to say that was the sign of a content man. Okay, maybe it was implied in the porn flicks.

He pulled out a glinting knife. “Now for a bit of civility. Although, I really felt like sinking my teeth into your delicious neck.” He planted the faintest of kisses with the softest lips on my arm.

Civility? Is this where he terminates the traitor?

## Chapter Eight

Goro watched his mate's eyes for any sign of fear as he slid his blade across his bare thigh to draw blood. Therein, those windows to the soul, a man could detect a lie, he mused. If she were a spy used to infiltrate The Cause through sex, would the truth be so easily detected though? The only way to know was to instigate the countdown to shape shifting. And that required a blood libation. So, I scraped a few precious beads of my soul's essence onto the blade.

Time to test her. Would she even care about ingesting my blood for the sake of espionage? A spy would do it. Pretend to complete my mission. Or ingest the blood for Voldon to create the connection I needed to control one of The Cause's commanders.

So, I sacrifice my blood for The Cause. "You may not have sensed a change while deeply distracted during Xquine mating." I forced a gentle smile. Enough to help her relax so I could complete the marriage contract. "But the wheels have been kicked into motion."

In the last vestiges of the day's sunny rays, the red drops of blood pooled with darkness.

Did the lifeless color foretell of my demise? Was Voldon about to have me by the genetic scruff of my neck, imprisoned through zombification? She *will* ingest the blood. If she was in an alliance with Voldon, I will lose all my free will. And Destiny demands a sacrifice. My life for The Cause. I handed over the knife.

Her brow furrowed a little.

Did she hesitate because she realized the precipice upon which she stood? I will know her true orientation in the Blood Wars nonetheless. "Take it, Darla. Accept my gift of self."

She curled her fingers around the hilt's black leather.

"Each drop for your comfort." I crossed myself in the Xquine way my father showed me how to honor the gods of life and happiness.

She raised the blade to her tongue, licked the blood from the thin edge, and handed me the knife's butt.

Did it taste of salt and metal?

My mouth watered.

"Wait." She reached back for the knife.

What was she up to? I passed it to her open palm.

She quickly sliced her skin and climbed into my lap, pressing her warm sticky lingering wetness from our mating against my thighs, fearless in her actions, presenting the blood on her arm for my consumption.

My nose tingled with the almost non-existent aroma of salt and iron that insisted I accept the offering.

She held the wound in front of her breasts. "I'd rather you not slit your tongue open." She winked.

How caring. Hopefully, it was sincere because, Gods, I had loved her when I brought her to *The Seeker*. She was so smart. And she cared for me like a woman should. Not like a woman fearing death at every turn in the Blood Wars. Her soul was gentler than the females I knew. So delectable and innocent of the existence of psychics throughout the universe. Here stands the opportunity to make her mine. Whether I make my last free choice or not. And so be it. No one



will claim I turned my back in fear. I slid the tip of my tongue across the rigid scratch marring her soft skin.

Every cell in my body jolted with an electric shock.

At last, awakened. That part of Destiny's promise rang true for me. What about Darla?

She lowered her arm, leaving the most beautiful nipples but inches away. "Anything else?"

Oh yes. Why not enjoy the fruits of my labors given she was willing? Ride the wave of sexual espionage until the crest breaks on the beach. One more moment to dance among the stars before I forget who I am through Voldon's enslavement might be my only reward for completing my duty. I leaned down to latch onto one of those luscious beads on Darla's breasts.

"I can see how our sexual union can be a hindrance to The Cause," she sighed, craning her neck backward, shifting her breasts higher for my convenience.

What an unusual thought during their first mating. Rather revealing. I released her taut nipple and kissed her succulent lips quickly to encourage cooperation. "What do you mean?" I stared into her brown eyes.

"We're going to be in trouble with all the mating I have planned and your inability to just jump up and pull your boots on." She smiled.

Raw truth resonated in those words. But even more reality slapped my jaw. Lying around, nude, and tempted into a dangerous death dance only left me vulnerable at Voldon's whims. So, a wise warrior would sheathe his weapon and take heed until his mate demonstrated blood-lust symptoms for *his* blood.

Now to see if she'd shape shift in forty-eight hours. I gazed into her eyes. "We should get up and move, really stretch our legs. We'll be back in the pod fighters before you know it. And we still have to worry about being separated."

Her eyebrows pinched. "Separated?" She shoved into a sitting position.

"Yes. If we're separated, you need to have some of my blood. Right now, our biological clocks are synchronized. We will both shift at the same time. You'll need my blood on hand in case we are separated when the blood lust comes upon you." Although that was a bad thing given she could just hand my essence over to Voldon. I didn't want to look suspicious by withholding transportable blood libations. Now for the true test of Darla's loyalty--seeing if she shape shifts the moment I do.

"Well, how do we deal with separation out here? Do you have equipment?"

Just special vials that preserve blood like a blood bank back on earth. "We'll use the tools I store aboard my pod fighter."

Before either could claim they felt the evening's salty breeze, we each knelt dressed in full-mercenary black leather tucking prepared metal syringes into the shafts of our boots.

"One injection per use, Darla. Just point it at your arm, push the trigger, and tuck the syringe back into your boot. You'll get five doses this way. Then you change the vial. With the two extra vials stored aboard your pod fighter, you'll manage ten days per vial. Use them sparingly. But, still, we have to hide our shifting ability. Or locals will notice we have problems they can use against us."

She chuckled. "Oh yeah. It's not every day a raving lunatic of a were-beast comes sniffing around for any kind of blood to quench its blood lust."

"Exactly."

"I know so much after three years on the starship. But I feel like I know nothing."

She was a damned good spy. I just need to forget about the espionage until the

transmutation occurs because she's my mate. A change of scenery would keep our minds off seductive body parts. I rose. "Let's walk down to the beach and listen to the waves beneath the moons." We'd be back in deep space staring at stars, riding in transit back to Arken soon. And being prepared to deal with Darla's blood lust is my big chore now. Earthlings didn't take to the binding as well as other humanoids. They experienced heightened desire. That might work against me when I'm watching to see if she's in need of my blood.

The walk in the two moons' muted light quickly landed me in a bed of sand with Darla, holding the gentle curve of her hips as I thrust into her clenching heat. On her hands and knees, with the moonlight gilding the pale skin of her slender back, nothing was more beautiful than my curvaceous mate. Not the round gray moons. Nor the trail of moonlight broken by the lapping waves against the beach. Not even her pleas for speed and strength in my pumping.

The observant stars and shushing wind witnessed our genuine coupling. Saw both of us strain and twist until she carefully rolled and faced me.

"I want to see your eyes," she said and reached for my shoulders.

Did her statement indicate she cared for me? Wanted to see my expression during our coupling as proof of my intentions? Good. She'd see I meant every thrust, every pulse, each groan. I leaned onto my palms in the cool sand and stared down into her glinting eyes.

Her hips matched each of my limited thrusts. Her gaping mouth noted she concentrated as did the little pleasure sounds she made.

How could she ever question my sincerity? She wouldn't again. I focused on her gaze and pumped quickly into her tight channel until her cries amplified. The sound sent my blood surging. My pulse pounding in my ears. And nothing but my inhalations and exhalations were audible over the sounds of her imminent release.

She could have one to remember in case I was being set up for betrayal.

Pressure built in my lower abdomen, pushing, forcing every iota of my thought on one thing. Ejaculation into the hottest tautest place on the planet. Into my mate.

I held my breath.

She arched her neck back and closed her eyes. "Oh, God!"

My hot seed exploded inside her.

She went rigid then trembled, looking back into my eyes. It was all I could do to watch her expression. I just wanted to close my eyes and saw back and forth as her channel clamped around my throbbing shaft, milking me of every precious drop of Xquine seed. We rode out the tide of our passion until I could barely move and I froze, gulping for breath on quaking arms.

Darla slid her palms down those very same arms. "Oh, Goro," she whispered, our bodies still tied together from mating. "What do we do about Voldon?"

Excellent question. "We wait." For the blood lust test. "And when we have the chance, we force him to reveal how he created that child." That should be enough to keep her content for the moment.

She sighed and pulled my shoulders down until I my body draped her soft breasts. "It's not my child."

Everything in my life hinged upon that singular point. "Don't worry about it anymore. We'll deal with all later."

She fell asleep first. My deadly sleeping beauty who curled upon her side as the moonlight divulged how the swells of her nude body mirrored the natural undulation where the silver edge of the beach's dunes touched the velvet black sky.

A beauty she was.

But is she my death sentence or my salvation? Thank the stars, sex wasn't the problem now. Luckily, my inner beast took over and plunged me to the depths of her soul where I dangled on the very root of my existence. Sex. It's too easy to get lost in the act. I didn't even watch for signs of her virginity that first time. She seemed so knowledgeable. So educated. Such a spy. And one's inner animal always wanted to seize the moment. To achieve self-gratification. As I had in the cave. To pleasure her so much that she begged for more on the beach.

Still, Voldon hadn't left me with any other recourse than to doubt my mate. The bastard. She would be resentful if she knew. Hurt. Betrayed. Unless she was a fraud. Maybe she carried evidence of a blood mate on her. If she were already mated, she'd have to store the male's blood nearby to inject herself when the blood lust came upon her. My gaze slid to her leather clothes lying in a pool of moonlight upon the sand.

Was she hiding anything like the shadows? Gods, I wanted to believe I was her mate. But I needed some reassurance. And reassurance lay right over there in her clothing. If I found two syringes, I'd know she had someone else's blood.

\* \* \* \*

Darla wasn't feeling well inside the dark cramped space of her pod fighter after Goro's unyielding exterior had finally collapsed in their mating back on the planet. The surrounding darkness couldn't override the fact he had finally given himself to her. Was I wrong to mate with an extraterrestrial, she wondered. And who wouldn't have spread her legs for a gorgeous barbarian who just needed to ravage a female? My love-sworn mate no less. He had saved me. He'd protect me now. But the chills shaking me now, combined with the cold sweats, almost made me puke.

The tight space where I laid seemed to shrink with every wave of nausea until I could barely draw breath.

Am I claustrophobic? Hell. We were almost to the wormhole relay. Almost to a safe haven where I could spread my legs for him again. Where I could feel whole instead of this ludicrous nauseated wreck.

A chill tickled down my arms.

Not again. But could this be a sign of something else? Something like pregnancy. Maybe. The legends stated two people would give birth to children of legends. Red Trekkar should have had her child by now. Red was the first free thinker to buckle to legends. Goro was next. So, I could be pregnant. Certainly it was too early to tell. Although, Red's changing eye color immediately noted when she conceived. But I won't have that luxury of her species. Earthling eyes don't change color once they've conceived.

And who knew what the symptoms were with pregnancy while carrying a half Xquine child. Then again, do I even need to care? Pregnancies between earthlings and extraterrestrials rarely go full term. If they do, the children are almost always stillborn. Crazy Darla used those facts to her advantage when working the bad cop side of Goro's game back on *The Seeker*.

Another wave of tingling chills tingled from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes as beads of sweat tickled my brow.

Just hang in there. There has to be something I can use to make sense out of the symptoms. "Computer?"

"Yes, Darla?"

"What do you know about Xquine pregnancy symptoms?"

"Very little is known about that culture. They were incredibly reclusive, highly volatile,

and their mating rituals have been rumored to be the most unusual among humanoids. But rumors usually spark more color than the blackness of space.”

Tell me something I didn’t know.

“Your biostats show you are deep in the blood lust, Darla. Your symptoms are not evidence of pregnancy.”

I hadn’t made the connection with blood lust symptoms. Having a computer around to answer questions made space travel not quite so difficult. “What else can you tell me about the blood lust?”

“Each were-assassin has similar symptoms but they come on at varying rates according to the mercenary’s culture of origin. Commander Goro has learned self-control through meditation because of his culture’s volatile nature. But earthlings have to be taught Goro’s skill. Try breathing deeply and slowly.”

Oy! “You sound like my father.” Like I ever cared about anything he tried to force me to do. His type of prayer never did a thing for me but left me sitting waiting for light to dawn over yonder hill. When the sun rose, still nothing hit me.

“Did the commander leave you with the antidote?”

Some antidote with these debilitating sensations. His blood only lasted twelve hours.

“Yes. But shouldn’t the blood lust come on at the end of the forty-eight hours?”

“That’s dependent upon your culture of origin. Some humanoids have a higher tolerance to the desire.”

Forget desire. This is similar to the way the flu tortured a person. So what was the point of this discussion? I’m supposed to self-medicate? “What are you saying?”

“Inoculate yourself.”

Goro said to use these draughts sparingly. “I don’t know. Goro didn’t tell me to shoot up every time I felt like it.”

“Do what’s right for you.”

Why did that seem like an open-ended reply?

A chill squeezed another roiling wave of bile from my gut.

## Chapter Nine

Goro sighed inside his pod fighter as he led his mate to the wormhole relay. But two days meant his blood boiled with blood lust. He had the male were-mate's hard-on as well as nausea and the cold sweats associated with pre-shifting symptoms. Time to embrace the biological alarm, he mused. Until I could land and exam Darla's condition with two roaming hands.

Nothing remotely suspicious had been hidden in her clothing that night on the beach. Thank the stars she had been too exhausted to catch me trying to look like I was killing a snake. Or that was my plan if she awoke. Now, getting Darla farther away from Voldon was imperative. Just in case she wasn't a sex spy. And I'd learn the truth as soon as I landed.

My gut churned, setting off another round of cold sweats.

Gods, what I'd give for a bite of salt-tinged flesh. Damned lust. Stupid wild thoughts. Nothing to be proud of. Lust. I should disgust myself. And a premature bite of flesh would ruin everything. Risking the moment I could witness her shifting was beyond foolish. But the only way to deduce where her loyalty lay was to give time a chance to reveal the truth. So, we'll layover at Tiv Mos 5, a small blue-and-green planet any earthling would love to visit. At least enough to get her out in the open to observe her symptoms firsthand then take care of these symptoms.

My arousal strained against my leather pants.

To trace the bloody edge of a cut upon her succulent skin with the tip of my tongue.

The blood coursing through my veins sparked with hot prickles.

Gods, to get out of here and rip her clothes off.

"Commander, we'll land on Tiv Mos 5's Dalna in four minutes and twelve seconds."

"Excellent." A little blood-letting will ease my symptoms. We might even have time to fit in some sexual instruction given I don't have to kill a traitor.

The pod fighter set down on a smooth rocky plain encircled by trees similar to broad-leaf earth palms. No matter how many places I visited around the universe, it was uncanny how common life shapes made for the best adaptations—universals in shape and function. Another common form, inorganic, a volcanic peak, thrust toward the blue sky on one end of the island.

Talk about an engorged highly explosive phallic omen. Dalna was the perfect place to get to the bottom of Darla. Ass. Wet thighs. And a whole lot of breasts. No sense in going down the sexually-frustrated male when sexual espionage might transmute one into a zombie at any moment. A little passing of semen never hurt anybody. In the end, she could give birth to the child of legend with or without me. Dead or alive with my duty fulfilled, I could die a content soul. And wouldn't that turn the game on Voldon? His spy giving birth to the child of legend he feared.

My groin throbbed in agreement.

Where is my mate? I scanned the landing area.

Air shimmered into a de-cloaking pod fighter hovering in descent mode, landing gear locked down.

To throw her down. Pin her into position. Just have a drop of salty metallic nectar.

Precious blood. Life's sacred gift.

Her hatch slid open.

Come to me, little one.

She reached up, shoving into a sitting position, and waved without so much as an inkling of blood lust in her gesture.

So much for wishful thoughts.

Anger nibbled at my chest.

Maybe the blood lust had a weaker affect on her? The symptoms manifested in different intensities among species. But never had I seen an earthling easily control the need.

She shoved her shoulders upward to throw a black boot over the fighter's side and looked around. "You have a thing for islands, you big romantic fool."

Well, romance was a good topic. But what about attacking me?

She is a sex spy. And I mated her. I'm such a fool.

My fingers ticked with a flinch.

Losing control wouldn't solve anything. Logic and reason were the only tools that would reveal her inner motives. I clenched my fingers into a fist. The knot did nothing to subdue my temper.

She hopped to the ground and casually strode toward me in her accursed tight black leather with all her seductive long brown hair swaying in the wind.

As they say on Earth, without a care in the world. She didn't even seem interested in the Earth-like qualities of Dalna. Darla was all business.

"You don't look so good, Goro." She studied me with the curiosity in a slight head tilt of a domesticated animal.

Nothing even remotely lust-driven resonated in her features. "It's the blood lust." I managed to swallow most of my disgust.

She halted, threw a thumb back over her shoulder toward her pod fighter, and opened her mouth.

Nothing graced him with a sound.

"You should be lost in the blood lust as well, Darla. We are mated."

She shut her mouth, blinked, and faced me. "The computer told me to take the antidote after I hurled."

Vomited? Was she so ill the computer intervened? Nonsense. Now my plan was foiled. "I told you not to use the draught."

"No." She planted her hands on her hips. "You instructed me to use it *sparingly*."

Maybe she concealed Voldon's blood in her pod fighter. Maybe she wretched on purpose and claimed a different cause.

"Goro."

My gaze slid from her black boots to her bulging breasts.

Those are mine. Or they're supposed to be.

"Goro! What's wrong with you?"

I slid my gaze up from her exquisite bosom to her concerned mask. Had she no idea I am deep in the blood lust? Although, I seem to be handling it fairly well. I could be ripping off her clothes and taking my due. It's almost been the full forty-eight hours.

"I really got sick. Go see. The cockpit is coated in puke."

The wind shifted and filled my nostrils with the noxious smell of bile.

So that much of her story was true. However, vomit indicated nothing other than she was

mated. *To someone.*

"Do you care if I bathe somewhere? I can't stand this stench." She held out her arm with her fingers straightened as if she were covered in some toxic material.

But what about my blood libation? Obviously, she wants nothing to do with me. Sending her down to the beach will at least give me a chance to cure my illness and formulate a new strategy to deduce her allegiance. Especially since I seem too troubled with blood lust myself. Distancing her from me will help me regain my bearings. He pointed to tiny stretch of black beach where two trees parted allowing wayward vacationers a view.

"Thanks." She shot me a killer smile and stepped off toward the bit of blue water.

Blessed Devros, those breasts disappeared.

"Aren't you coming, Goro?"

Not when conspiracy smotheres me. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Oh, then, I suppose it's safe."

That's a matter of perspective when the beauty could hurl projectiles without lifting a finger. I pulled a syringe from the shaft of my boot.

One shot of sanity to reset everything. At least to give me a chance to think things through once again. I shoved it against my bare arm and pressed the trigger.

An instant later, a wave of serenity spread throughout my body, infiltrating every cell. Driving back the animal that tried to surface.

Back to your cage where I can think rationally. I sucked in an enormous breath. And exhaled, purging any remnant desire to mate.

Time to measure everything Darla said, or ruin any future I still might be able to recover in this madness. My footsteps quickly consumed the space between our pod fighters where the opened hatch couldn't hide the sunlight glinting off the bile pooling on the floorboard.

"Computer?"

"Yes, commander?"

"Report Darla's biostats prior to her injection of the blood-lust antidote."

"Darla's biostats showed she was deep in blood lust."

For whom? "Did she say anything to indicate her thoughts?"

"Darla thought she was pregnant, commander. I informed her that she was experiencing blood lust symptoms and that the way to correct the problem was to inject herself with antidote."

But Darla could have fooled the computer and used a different syringe. Or even something she had staged to be administered by the computer given she returned in animal form. "Do you have any blood in storage ready to administer in case she returns in were-form?"

"No."

She didn't seem knowledgeable enough with were-assassin duty to think to store anything. Or that's part of Voldon's plan. Fool me as long as possible. Why? What can I get other than satisfaction in killing my biggest enemy? Or controlling me.

So the wait continues.

Was Darla playing me? With her intelligence to contend with, a myriad of scenarios could unfold. Never had I imagined duty would lead me to suicide.

\* \* \* \*

Waves gently rolled against Darla's bare skin where she stood in waist-deep water, wringing the water out of her leather shirt. Is leather even washable, she wondered. Between dry-cleaning back home and the cleansing chambers on *The Seeker*, everything seemed so straight forward. "Stupid extraterrestrial clothes. They could include cleaning instructions on a

label. Earth sure had lots of great ideas.” I shook out the black leather and turned to the beach.

Goro waited, his exterior a bit softened, watching from where I’d tossed my boots and pants between two boulders.

Thank goodness he looked more like himself. “Hi.” I smiled.

His stoic gaze watched the watery horizon as if he were the guardian of something too unique to dare losing.

After three months with the Crellons, a little extra attention was kind of nice. Nobody would believe me about the perks in marrying a barbarian. And we’re blood mates. The sex and the desire are amazing. He was so caught up in the emotions himself that he stood the watchdog, protecting me.

The ocean breeze whipped his long black hair across his face.

He didn’t seem to care.

Well, he just needed to let loose just a bit more and swim. Risk being caught off guard. Because they’d be back fighting the Blood Wars soon. They’d probably never have this time alone again. But first I need to lay my shirt out to dry. Then I’ll drag his stiff butt into the waves. I waded out of the water to spread my shirt in the warm sunlight across one of the boulders.

He continued to study the glassy water in the distance.

Warm moist sand begrudgingly gave beneath my footsteps.

Just like the way Goro hid his smiles. I struggled to shove my feet faster through the sinking layer of grains on the beach. “You’re in a funky daze, Goro.”

His indifferent gaze slid to me.

Is that scrutiny supposed to express his idea of caring? Or was he just admiring the view of his nude mate? I’ve waited a long time to feel that gaze on my bare skin. I gave my shirt one last shake and stretched it over the flattest surface of the two boulders behind Goro.

Now to seduce the man. He seems to prefer birthday suits. “I’m going for a swim. It sure looks like you could use a bit of loosening up. Why don’t you strip and come along?” I clamped my hands together behind my back and barely shifted left to right, just to swing my breasts at him. Invitingly.

He didn’t flinch. “I wouldn’t want to get caught with my pants down.”

Had he really uttered that well-worn earth phrase? Surely it wasn’t a universal observation. And the way his eyes frosted over warned he was angered. At what? I’m not allowed to lure him into anything? “What’s wrong, Goro?”

“We need to leave as soon as possible.” He turned toward the pod fighters.

“Right now? You just told me I could wash up.” That was the problem. I obviously took too long. Hell. A girl couldn’t win with extraterrestrials. I grabbed my clothing and dashed through the warm sand after his swaying form. “Can you let me put my pants on before we countdown for blast off?”

“As I stated, it is unwise to get caught with your pants down.”

Did he think that smart-ass comment was going to get me back inside my pod fighter jetting off on his tail?



## Chapter Ten

If Goro thought he was getting away with treating me like crap, he had another think coming, Darla fumed. Eternity was one Hell of a long time. I halted, yanked on my pants, both boots, and slithered into my cantankerous wet shirt.

Goro's back shrank as he walked across the rocky plateau toward the pod fighters.

Where is he going? The man just chased me halfway across the universe. Well, it wasn't like he was going to leave me here. Or would he? Maybe it was better to demand some respect through a little resistance though. Get his attention. I took a step toward Goro's straightened spine and followed at my own pace. Resisting.

He halted near his pod fighter, turning to face me.

Okay, he was definitely mad by the way he just waited there, stiff as a tree trunk in the brisk wind. What had I done? After my screw up landing me on a slave ship, I need to pay attention. I stopped a step short of him and snaked my arms across the damp leather covering my chest. "What happened? I've obviously ticked you off."

One of his black eyebrows arched slightly.

How odd for the calm commander who never winced or flinched. And what did his shift in body language mean? "Remember I can't read minds, Goro. You're going to have to lower your superior self to speaking."

His cold gaze locked on mine. "You seem too comfortable in this new environment. Shouldn't you take more care in your decision making?"

He was disgusted with me because I took a bath? "Excuse me but you're the one who let me go to the beach."

"I am not the one who injected myself prematurely to avoid the blood lust."

Oh, that's right. He was pissed when I crawled out of the pod fighter. Like I knew any better. And I thought he was going to take me back to The Cause for termination. Life is so unfair in giving some beings the gift of mindreading and the rest of us insignificant powers. But since he can't read my mind, I'll enlighten him. "I don't know the rules of operation when it comes to blood fucking, Goro."

He winced at the denigrating label Crazy Darla coined so beautifully.

"But you have to cut me some slack, dearest mate, if I've done something insulting or sacrilegious. I have no idea how anything in this universe operates outside of what I learned while I was in your care. I can't be held responsible for your inadequate schooling—"

"This is not my fault." He stepped so close the wind could only blow a hair between our noses.

Heat radiated off him in an insanely provocative manner.

Oh, to push him down and ride him or just knee him in the family jewels.

"The only way I can keep us alive is for our biorhythms to be synchronized," he growled away the seductive ambience. "And your antsy self-administration of my blood has prevented that singular objective."

He'd never lost his cool like this.

I have broken down the indomitable Commander Goro.

Maybe I should have been stronger. Held out. Just puked every cell out of my body? Well, being angry won't fix this mess. I don't want to be the cause of more stress for him. "Look, I'm sorry. I was getting claustrophobic in that space jet. I didn't realize I was screwing things up for you. I admit it. I'm as dumb as a fence post out here. How can we fix this?"

He sighed with a snip and minutely straightened his spine. "We'll have to camp here. When the sickness comes upon you, since you have noted your symptoms are far worse, we shall both offer the sacrifice of blood libation."

Sacrifice? Talk about an interesting way to look at the exchange. A gift had to be part of the ritual. To shift into a were-assassin that could defend free thinkers, one definitely had to pay some kind of price. "Deal."

I'd have plenty of time to clean the yuck out my pod fighter.

And we'd get a day's vacation at the beach.

Sunsets, sunrises, and a whole lot of skinny dipping certainly made for a honeymoon to remember.

\* \* \* \*

Goro couldn't read anything other than happiness in his mate's mask where she stood before him swathed in glorious sunlight upon the smooth volcanic plain, arguing her innocence before a male who would kill himself if accused of something as irresponsible as letting down The Cause with premature blood libations. But she just stood there, defending herself, he noted. Any rational female would also cower being on the receiving end of an Xquine male's anger. Why does this bother me?

Had she gotten her way?

Or was she completely oblivious to the temper his species was renowned for? The temper that led to the fighting ability of which Voldon feared enough to destroy Xquine and its children. Grant it, managing to hide the wild Xquine irritability and avoid sharing my displeasure had been a life's choice gifted through intense meditation and the veneration of Devros. *The Seeker's* crew knew to walk the straight path of perpetuating free thinking.

"Okay. Truce." She thrust out a palm for shaking. "You teach me what I need to know, and I'll follow your command. Just give this stupid earth girl a break every now and then. My lesser-evolved mind just can't keep up with your inaccessible thought processes."

Hopefully, her words revealed everything hovering between us. How in all that was holy was I even to begin to predict a sacred sexual union would cause such a multitude of problems? Destiny could have left me a warning in her legend. But now, all I could do was wait out the game. Feign acquiescence. I slid my fingers across Darla's smooth warm hand and gave it an obligatory squeeze.

She shot me a coy smile.

The kind that could worm into your heart and wrap around your soul.

"So, do we need to waste time building a lean-to or do we just get to spend forty-eight hours getting down and dirty." She blinked demurely.

If Voldon was going to zombify me, I might as well fuck the brains out of his spy. And those breasts... I'm in trouble, Devros.

"So what's the great secret for washing out a pod fighter?" she asked.

That was definitely an excellent task to keep her focused and off my hide. "We use buckets and scrub brushes back aboard *The Seeker*."

Her innocent enthusiasm metamorphosed into classic misery.

"Whether on the seas or riding waves of electro-magnetic radiation, a sailor must contend

with swabbing the deck.” That would keep the little vixen busy for a while. Sexual espionage or not.

Darla disappeared down to the beach only to wrestle one of her boots full of water back to where she could dowse out her pod’s bowels.

Sweet approach to solving her problem. I could be nice. I could offer her the rags I carried in my pod. But keeping her busy would keep her out of my annoying uninhibited mane. To the little trooper’s credit, she leaned into the cockpit, stretching the leather over her firm sexy ass in formal presentation, and scrubbed her floorboard with twigs and sea water.

Oh to run my fingers down the seam of the seat of her pants.

The blessed wind kicked up my hair into a twisting cat-o-nine.

Probably to flay me for my arousal.

Maybe the time had come to assume my commander duties of shaving. Why? I commanded only one—a woman who might be manipulating me like a chess piece. Especially with her leather stretched tighter than the ass it covered. That was some intentional positioning. She strategized like a master.

And when she shot me a straight-lipped smile overarched by an inquisitive dark eyebrow, I dared not utter a word. Or I’d be the one doing the scrubbing.

An honorable mate should have helped her.

I really should have.

But a man had his pride. His honor. And hadn’t she gotten the prize with mating? My soul is everything to me. But helping her clean the pod fighter involved two more handfuls of succulent breast. I’m just not ready to succumb to lust. Yet. Again. Even though my traitorous thoughts deceive me.

Blood lust. I will be stronger, an Xquine commander, the last of a warrior breed that could hold out beyond the normal boundaries of sanity to wait for the kill. Yet, something niggled deep in my core beyond the nearby insistence of my groin to offer interference. Something civilized. Or perhaps sympathetic. Just why should I give her a chance to weave her magic? When I probably frittered away my last free thoughts standing here debating over whether to have sex or not.

Anger flickered in his chest.

Everything was either Darla’s fault or I owe her everything when I learn she’s innocent.

A lively bit of music danced across the rocky platform.

Flutes or some sort of woodwind. Where did that come from? I turned full circle to determine the lilting sound’s origin.

Darla who used a forearm, wiping a strand of dark brown hair from where it stuck to her forehead.

“Do you hear that music, Darla?”

“It’s mine. The computer had some earth tunes in its files.” She smirked and turned back to her chore as if she couldn’t believe I had the balls to ask about the music without offering to assist her.

I couldn’t help but lose a weak careless chuckle. But she’d never know about my emotional slip given the wind blew in my direction.

She folded over the cockpit, pointing her sweet ass back at me.

Purposely.

Gods what I’d do to ram into that wet heat. Think about other things before she seduces me into complacency for the kill. So, how in the stars does she plan to get the sloshing water out

of that cockpit?

She hopped down onto the rocky island.

Okay, she's going to ask for advice.

She turned and walked toward me.

Yes, Devros. She requires my knowledge. Maybe she'll repay me with some sexual favors.

Those breasts bobbed with each of her steps.

The wind growled.

Something familiar. Maybe a warning for me to run before I lunge in too deeply.

That's the sound of a pod fighter taking off.

Darla stopped, turning back to the spacecraft. Her long brown hair snaked through the air. Her pod fighter rose, hatch open, rolled one-hundred-and-sixty degrees, and hovered upside down.

Pure genius. What an exceptional way to drain the cockpit. Oh, this woman is far more intelligent than I ever thought. Or she had worked with extraterrestrial spacecraft before he found her.

Why does that idea not surprise me?

\* \* \* \*

If that man thought I was going to just fall into line behind him, he had another think coming after watching me scrub out the pod fighter, Darla seethed. Some females in the universe might be that foolish. Not I. I watched my spacecraft land and shut down as I had commanded.

At least something does what it's supposed to do. "Well," I whirled to Goro, "I guess I'll get busy and make coffee."

One of his black eyebrows arched. But he harbored enough intelligence not to say anything about my sexist crack.

Do this. Do that. Spread 'em and make a hole. The audacity. Men and their universal behavior. I marched past him.

The last bit of moisture squished in the sole of my boot.

Even if the only way to clean out the fighter was to fill my boot, Goro could have offered some sort of help. Maybe he's just been a commander too long. Joy for me. I married him *forever*. At least I was spared the honor-and-obey bit Father crammed down women's throats back home. What a mistake the way my self-medicating chewed at him. Or I was wrong about him from day one. Was he just an ass? Now, he's a barbarian ass. My barbarian ass. No sense sitting around pondering things impossible to understand. I might as well stretch my legs. I strode off toward the peaceful rolling waves.

Maybe we're going back to The Cause for another reason? Nothing ever came of Voldon's rumored child. Yet. Will I be convicted as a traitor?

Only the wind plowed down to the black sands of the beach with me. The waves yapped at my feet. Unlike my mate.

Fine. I just need a break from him. From this madness. Some time to clear my head. I headed north along the waterline's meandering bits and the blobs of a debris trail. The forest paralleled the jewel-toned ocean in an almost cozy friendship. One of camaraderie. Not nitpicking. I sighed.

Oh, to have a mate who wanted some sort of friendship. What's worse, I'm bound to him with blood-lust shackles. How can I be ticked off when I'll always need sex to appease the

were-assassin demands of my new life? Being a misfit psychic on Earth is starting to feel far more gratifying than life married to a were-beast commander who wants nothing more than my blood and a good hump. Surely he mated with me just to beat Voldon. Nothing else about his actions means otherwise.

Sunlight began to burn my shoulders.

Now even the sun is pissed at me. I veered into the row of tall gray slashed with white tree trunks. Into shadows.

Cool shade held back the sun's vicious assault.

Good because I need a break. Just some time to walk off this self-defeating crap. She walked farther and farther, deeper into the bobbing branches and leaves of the forest.

My foot slipped.

The ground gave way beneath me.

"Oh shit," I shouted.

Darkness and rays of penetrating sunlight rushed past me.

My butt landed on curving ground.

Leaf litter and dirt showered down around me.

"Hello, Darla. You fell in a hole, moron," I snarled and thrust up a palm to block the shower of earthen bits still working their way down to dust my limbs.

Sunlight peered through the dust cloud, almost mocking the woman who seemed to try to hide from it where it hovered way back up the hole.

How am I going to get out of here?

\* \* \* \*

Sunset threatened to snuff Goro's natural lighting while he waited for his mate to return. Where was she? Meeting with *Voldon*? Had Darla departed on the other side of the island? Maybe Voldon picked her up. Or something even more realistic happened. Sex. Sex spies had sex...

Anger raged through my veins, coursing through my limbs to try to pound through the very limits of my body.

Probably emotions heightened from blood lust.

Losing control wouldn't solve anything. I clenched my fingers and closed my eyes blocking the reddening orange light heralding day's end.

Darla probably just got lost. A telekinetic person could hurl things. That had nothing to do with her sense of direction. And they'd seen no sign of approaching spacecraft. So her absence had to have nothing to do with Voldon, rendezvous or escape.

She was simply lost.

Stupid earthling. Like there's a safe place to wander anywhere in the universe during the Blood Wars. I should have been more collected in my reaction to her actions though. Gentler. Maybe she wouldn't have wandered off mindlessly seeking sanctuary elsewhere. Especially if she were innocent in this fiasco I'd created.

There's a bright side to the situation. A night alone in a foreign wilderness could teach her to rely upon me. At least, temptation wouldn't hover tonight. Besides, a spy could take care of herself.

\* \* \* \*

Sunlight shut off quickly when the rays turned orange inside the cave, but something else was there with Darla. Something glittering and brilliantly white, she thought. Something around the corner from where I landed in my grand fall. So fearing the approach of imminent darkness

with nightfall would be a waste of precious time. Besides, I had a few knives for protection. And the incredible treasure.

The tunnel that dumped me in this hole was far too unstable to risk its collapse and my burial in climbing out the way I'd entered. So, I'd searched the cave and found the strange crystalline glow from a smooth rounded crystal.

The beautiful gem was like one of those I'd seen many times in New Age jewelry. Smooth, rounded, a cabochon. But enormous, almost the size of a soccer ball. Nobody could slap that big baby on a chain and wear it as a pendant. One smooth hole, on the side right where the wall's black rock held it in place, although slick and a clean indentation, was definitely a defect in the object.

Too bad. If only I could take it back to Goro. I tried to wrap my fingers around the rounded sides, hooked some fingertips inside the defect, and pulled.

The black rock wall refused to release its treasure.

Well, at least I'm not trapped in a dark hole. Oddly enough, it's crazy that I'm just lying here playing with a glowing rock instead of freaking out about being buried alive.

A yawn tugged at my jaw.

Maybe I'm too tired to care. I stretched my arms as high as I could with the unyielding need to yawn, leaned against the cave's hard rocky wall, and closed my eyes.

## Chapter Eleven

Goro stared at the inside of his cockpit where he laid all night, waiting, seething over his mate's stupidity. She'd proven many times how her powers of telekinesis were strong enough to work in her defense. And she packed enough knives to open a shop. So safety wasn't the issue. Where had she gone? What were her motives? Was her display of ludicrous behavior all part of a greater plan?

Voldon will not beat me with sexual espionage.

Soon the hatch would slide open. I'll climb from this tomb to track Darla.

Suddenly, the hatch slid open.

The sky yawned with a yellow greeting.

Deepening, promising to whiten and fade to blue.

Time to go.

Xquine males mastered tracking at an early age. The skill lead me along the salty beach where if she had walked, the waves thought it a grand jest to steal away her footprints. So I walked farther above the stretch of the tides, along the tree line. An hour of casual walking with my gaze fixed intensely on the ground led me to a sandy footprint between the lacing of roots from two tree trunks.

Darla's boot impression.

She hadn't seemed to care if she broke branches in the floor cover. Nor did she worry about hiding where she stepped. Darla didn't seem to be hiding anything. Maybe luring me... Just as suspected.

She just kept going deeper into the forest. Until she discovered a hole.

Grant it, the hole had fresh edges. There was this Earth phrase down the hatch that suited the situation. She must have fallen into a smaller hole. And then it crumpled inward, widening. Maybe this was Voldon's trap though. Care was due to keep ahead of the game. But Devros always promoted proactive behavior. Face your fear. And it's not like I no longer had my thoughts or made decisions. Bless Devros. I still had control over my being. "Are you in there, Darla?"

Earthen bits jiggled loose around the opening.

So much for a man's weight combined with gravity when leaning. I didn't want to bury her alive. And she would be irretrievable soon if she didn't get out of there. And where would I be without my mate's blood? "Darla!"

"Goro?" the faint reply questioned. "I can't find a way out of here."

Curse the stars. "What possessed you to go in?"

"The universe didn't bother to offer me an option."

I almost laughed.

"There's something down here you might want to see."

Really?

"Even if you don't, I want you to come help me get it out of here so I can take it with us. It's stuck."

Women. Was this a premonition of my future? I'll be painting her toenails before long.

"We need to get back to the pod fighters."

"But it's the most enormous gemstone. All white and, I swear, calming. I want it. But I can't move it."

Calming? Very few things in the universe could resonate happiness. What would be in a cavern on a volcanic island in the middle of nowhere of Quadrant Three? "Describe it."

"It's large and smooth. A lovely crystal."

Crystal? Crystals turned out to be bad news half the time.

My gut began to sink.

If it was a *Xanthium treclus*, she'd never part with it. Nor would she function as a were-mate. She'd cease to cooperate under the spell of her new addiction, entranced by the crystal.

"How large, Darla?"

"About the size of a soccer ball. Or so I think. It's embedded in hard rock."

That's a good-sized stone but not so large its energy is drawing me underground. Maybe I could force her up the hole without getting too close to the stone's addictive vibrations. "Are there any other markings?"

"Just a defect on one side where the wall swallows it. A hole."

If the crystal had been cracked, there may be a protected area in the cave to avoid the radiating spell. "I'm coming down." I poked a vine down the hole and began a descent.

When I gained a foothold at the bottom of the tunnel, a dust cloud swirled like a smoke screen.

Darla waved at the hazy particulates, coughing. "Nice vine. We can climb out of this pit now. Let's just get the gem and go."

She appeared normal. Dirty. But in good health. Physically. Let's test the mental aspect. "I want you to climb up this vine while I bring the crystal." I shook the sturdy length of vegetation.

"This way." She waved me into the shadows.

Weak, very impressionable woman. She was entranced. "No."

She whirled to face me.

"You work your way up the vine. I don't want to risk you being buried alive another moment."

Her mask melted into a warm smile. "Oh, how sweet."

Sunlight danced in the tears pooling in her eyes. The reaction was priceless or staged like performed by an award-winning actress.

"Oh, Goro." She pressed her palms together in a not-so-Darla fashion. "I knew you loved me."

That love-sick reaction was not the way a *Xanthium treclus* affected a being. If she lured me into a trap, so be it. But what if she found a different type of powerful crystal? Just what had she discovered? "Show me this treasure."

The luminescence didn't require Darla to lead me to the surface that looked like rounded ice. The crystal pulled me through the darkness like a beacon.

What a serene glow. Calming as she had said. And so rejuvenating.

Then I spotted the eye socket almost buried in the cave wall. "Holiest of suns, Devros, do you know what this is?"

Darla's clueless mask looked genuine perched above her shrug. "I don't care what your sacred star thinks. I just want my crystal."

Well, this was anything but a wedding gift. Call their visit to the planet Destiny. Or not.



This was a crystal skull Voldon dreamed of possessing. Alone, the skull worked magic on those who possessed it. Or worked at their undoing. Destiny always observed through the skull's hollow eyes and paid a man his due through the skull's wicked grin. But how had the skull managed to become embedded in a subterranean volcanic chamber? My gaze slid to the awe on Darla's face.

She just stared at the relic.

Could the skull reveal her innocence? She certainly looked innocent enough.

She smiled at me. "You look like you've found a lost key." Her words whispered with the hum of nature's song.

Or the crystal was playing with my thoughts.

"I feared you wouldn't come for me. That I was lost down here." She sighed and studied the skull. "At least I had this light."

At least Destiny walked with her. I should have been paying attention.

I hadn't illuminated anything. How could I have been so cruel? She was the woman I saved from Voldon for myself. I held her in my heart for years. A commander doesn't waste time choosing the right mate to have an enemy learn the woman's identity and plan to steal her by whatever means. No. This is Darla, my mate. And I never want to hear that loneliness in her voice again. I grabbed her, crushing her nose into my chest.

She has to be as innocent as the crystal revealed. "Forgive my stupidity, Darla. I'm trying to keep us alive." Even if I've only been concerned about saving the only Xquine left to fight for justice.

Her arms snaked around my chest.

Warmth encircled me. Intoxicating beautiful addictive heat. The skull doesn't seem angry with me for my selfish need to survive now.

"It's all right." She leaned her head back to meet my gaze. "I joined The Cause for better or for worse." She shot me a forced smile. "Being buried alive is part of the worse."

Not to a man whose character operated solely on responsibility and honor. Could she even begin to understand the enormity of the weight of the universe? For a start, she had to grasp the reality of her were-assassin duties. "I was wrong to drive you away. But you have to keep an eye on the ground as much ahead of as behind you."

Her gaze slid down to run along the cave's dirt floor.

Avoidance is what got us into this dilemma. "Darla, it is obvious now that Destiny needs us to work together."

She eyed me sideways. "We haven't been?"

Dare I admit my fear she was a sex spy to that suspicious stare of my mate? Darla wasn't the type to take the news lightly. Or I'm cowering from fear. Curse my weakness. I'm sitting here with Destiny staring me down through one crystal socket. The damned thing is surely grinning at me.

She hovered there, watching me.

Maybe she wouldn't be so angry under the skull's influence. It wasn't that I hadn't always wanted her. I did. But Voldon ripped a crevasse between us. A crevasse that still exists. One I widened with my fear of change. Until I can build a bridge across that crevasse, we're at a stalemate.

Maybe this was my chance to set the bridge's supports. Confess. She had to understand. Hopefully she wouldn't attack me with a barrage of flying debris. But killing one's blood mate in an act of self-preservation was nothing more than suicide. Mates were a half of a person.

Only complete when they had each other. There was no way out of this other than stating truth.

“You were saying?” she asked.

Time to face an even worse fear. “I apologize for my behavior. I haven’t been very supportive.”

“It’s funny you mention that.” She reached for my stubbled cheek, ran the warmest palm across my jaw line, tenderly, only to roughly thrust her fingers into my hair like a mate who hungered to please me. “I could use a little support,” she hissed.

Those words dripped with blood lust.

I went rock hard

Her fingers clenched a fistful of my hair. She rubbed her lips against my neck and fluttered kisses over my jaw.

How long could a man withstand such an assault of gooseflesh and jolting need? And who would want such a barrage to end? As long as we didn’t exchange blood...

Her mouth worked back up to my cheek and warm breath buffeted my skin. “But I’m not holding those days against you, husband. You can catch up on paybacks now.” Her succulent lips were on me, coaxing mine open, lighting a fire that muted the skull’s light. “Then we’ll call it even.”

Who wouldn’t wrestle with her in the most sacred of dances?

My gut shafted like lightning into my throbbing loin. My knees buckled, pulling her down on top of my lap in a knot of hungry writhing arms.

All that delicious skin of her soft breasts and velvety nipples found my face, begging for a truce.

The scent of the salty blood teased where it pulsed beneath her skin.

My mouth watered.

*The blood lust.*

What did it matter if we spent the day in the skull’s radiance? Destiny was watching. Encouraging me to meet fear head on. To risk giving myself to the woman I held in my heart one more time, showing my weakness, even if she hadn’t proven she was my mate. And fear would always be waiting, demanding a confrontation when I finished with her. Blood lust wasn’t the answer though. Time would demand our blood libation. And a little sex would make mask our symptoms until that fateful moment, making our wait easier as the clock ticked until she shape shifted.

She threw her head back and presented the flesh of her neck.

The finest of offerings.

An involuntary growl burbled up from deep inside my chest. *My inner beast accepting the gift.* Cleavage looked equally delicious. I trailed the tip of my tongue along the v-neck of her leather shirt.

“Goro,” she groaned and squirmed beneath my tongue.

Her long iron legs squeezed around me, pulling my hardness right where she wanted it. Our leather clothing flew into shadows, piece by cumbersome piece, as if drawn back by some metaphysical force to allow us to pleasure ourselves.

Hot skin slid across hot skin.

And there was nothing but Darla. Delicate beaded nipples gushing with life. Her hot breath promising tomorrows. Starving hands, grabbing, demanding. Skin, delectable skin. She moved so quickly that I almost forgot to hold my arousal in check and ruined our joining. Almost wasted precious seed.

Deeper and deeper I felt I was sinking into darkness. Into a frenzied state.

Not today. Not one drop of Xquine semen would be lost in a misstep. This woman would carry those precious endangered seeds. The legacy of an entire race. I whirled her onto her back, locked her knees into position, and thrust into her hot moist vise in one intoxicating stroke, trying to touch her soul.

The soul promised by Destiny.

The soul that would cradle the genetic remnants of a world destroyed by the greed perpetuated by a long line of insane beings. Under the peaceful gaze of Destiny, I had to be in the right. Dutiful. And what better charge than ravishing the woman I desired. Elbows locked, I paused, poised over the most beautiful altar of a woman, contemplating lighting her inner candle. Who wouldn't bow down in holy reverence and leave a token with such a goddess at my feet?

She had thrown herself at me.

She had opened herself to me.

She is *mine*.

"Please, Goro." She whined. Her hands begged I hurry where they rubbed, conjuring gooseflesh from my chest.

But those hands couldn't draw me down to her. Couldn't force me to comply until I was ready. I threw back my head and welcomed the ungodly need to plow her fertile fields like an mindless farmer.

She snapped her chin to her chest, then her head from side to side.

Wild with need. Wanton is how I liked her.

"Goro, I'm going to die," she cried.

Not until you give birth to the child of Destiny. Whether you have me guarding your back or just packing my seed. She would be the vessel doing Destiny's bidding. Dutifully.

The way her body tightened around me sent shivers out to the tips of my limbs.

Gods jest. At last, the head of my manhood was enlarging, ballooning to release sperm. Her cries only reaffirmed the presence of my Xquine nubs and filaments.

My shaft jerked with the beginnings of ejaculation.

I couldn't breathe, gulped for breath, and tried to thrust as much as possible, pumping through the series of pulsing releases into her soul, to root my child deep inside her womb.

Darla's screams shook dirt loose from the earthen cave's ceiling while she clutched at my stiff forearms. Or the roof collapsed because of my roar.

Sweet universe, a man shouldn't have to live without a woman gasping for breath beneath him. Drowning in a sea of air. But I could do nothing to help her until I could bear my own weight without the support of two locked elbows braced against the cave floor. Until I could find enough blessed air to fill my lungs as well. My pulsing shaft demanded I thrust to squeeze the last of my essence from my body into her constricting womb that milked me of every drop of seed.

I had to pump. Grind. Saw. Release my seed. And she begged me to.

Finally, miraculously, I could stop. My manhood finished its glorious duty. And I leaned against stiff arms to gasp for precious breath.

Her cries died. She tossed her head to one side and moaned. "Oh." She curled her upper body off the ground to where she could look into my eyes.

Where I held my sweating body propped upon rigid arms.

"You're amazing," she whispered and slid her intoxicating warm palms up my chest. "Let go of my legs. I want to wrap them around you." Her hands slid around to my back and

down to squeeze my ass, pulling me even more against her groin.

Those hands on my body almost resurrected the beast, pulling my ass, trapping me deeper inside her.

Oh she craved me. Demanded more.

“Release my legs, Goro,” she insisted.

And allow her some fraction of control? What could it hurt to play on the same ground? It’s not like she was going anywhere with an Xquine penis lodged inside her. I bent one locked elbow, then the other, rolling onto my side in the silky dust of the cave’s floor.

She couldn’t have detached from my bulbous phallus if she tried. But she seemed to happily roll along. So much that she shoved me farther until I lay on my back where she straddled my groin.

“I used to ride horses,” she croaked, rising as far as my shaft’s engorged head would allow. “I always wondered if riding a man felt as good.”

Forget about resting. Gods, I wanted her to talk like that. A lot.

All my blood raced back to my groin.

My manhood flinched, warning of another round of ejaculation.

Oh to press her back into the ground and explode.

“I’ll never be the same after this.” She slid along my hard shaft.

Who possibly could? Not the way she rode me into another round of rapture. I just wanted to roar. To lean her over. To bite into her collarbone where she couldn’t get away. Oh for a big taste of Darla as she trembled on the edge of my sanity.

And we danced with fervor. Gasping. Moaning. Groaning. Whimpering with unfulfilled passion until she cried out with delight as the first of twenty pulsating ejaculations flooded and embedded more of my sperm in her womb.

I grabbed her slender waist and held her quaking body steady. But she stopped. Stone still. Gods, I just needed her to move. I almost crawled out of my skin, snatching at pebbles and dust on the cave’s hard floor. “Don’t stop, Darla. Or your knees stay locked next time.”

“Bossy, aren’t you?” She shot me a wicked grin in the crystal’s gratuitous light and rose, contracting her vaginal muscles. “But all pleasure lies in the waiting.”

The constriction sent my mind reeling with that damned philosophical point. I gasped with my eyes shut. “I thought you’ve never done this before.”

“Earth girls with fathers who are preachers read interesting material. Not to mention, I had some friends who weren’t allowed to date until they were eighteen either. We’d have sleepovers where we watched porn. We called that dinner with a movie. Someone had to teach us. But I’ll never admit that if anyone asks.”

Who else needed to know? Curiosity definitely didn’t kill the pussycat. And this pussycat was mewling. Apparently she learned quite a bit from those movies. Just in the way she moved her body was more than instinctual. My body racked with a final purging burst of seed, sending her into a second climax until she collapsed on top of me in a pant.

We struggled to breathe in the dank earthen space.

Earth women were apparently easy to please. Or I’ve got more work cut out for me than I ever expected.

“This is the way we should be, Goro,” she whispered hot words against my breast. “Entwined together. Rather, tied together.”

Destiny had a way of making a person face reality. I’m glad she realized hers.

Time would have passed quickly if she hadn’t noted how our personal relationship should

be. But each agonizing second we waited for my penal deflation only added to the concept of infinity—marriage. And my dishonor. I had to tell her about my distrust. And she wouldn't like what she heard.

## Chapter Twelve

Time to face fear, Goro admitted inwardly. Like anything could be worse than lying in the arms of a woman you love while you plot to expose her? Do mates actually live like this? Better get to the revelation and live in peace. "I said we needed to talk," I began.

"Oh?" She turned her nose into my neck.

"Yes, Darla. I must tell you what has bothered me." Why did this seem more difficult than facing Voldon?

She shoved up on a palm and looked into my eyes. "Something's been bothering you, the toughest bad ass of the free-thinking universe." She smiled at me with the most loving smile a child might see from its mother.

Knowing I was the toughest bad ass in the universe certainly helped polish my tarnished honor. But was that skull glossing over my recent behavior for her? "Yes, Darla."

She sighed. "How can anything bother you after what we just felt? And I felt it twice." Her eyebrows danced in delight. "And I want to feel it thousands upon thousands of times again. I'm a fool for duty now. Even if it entails making coffee and washing windows."

Her thoughts were far too scattered to make that discussion. "Darla, you have to pay attention."

She giggled and descended to tuck her nose back into my neck. "I'm too tired. Can you be all stiff and boring after we nap?"

In a subterranean chamber without a drop of water and a highly-energized crystal... Nap?

She snaked her hand over my chest and cooed.

At least she seemed happy. Maybe this wasn't the best time to shatter her earthling dreams of marriage? But she'd stated one thing. She is married to me. Or so she stated under the skull's influence. That type of confession must hold as much weight as one made while inebriated. Maybe he could question her ever-so-coyly and end the confusion. It couldn't hurt. "Darla?"

"Hmmm?" The soft sound meant she was almost asleep.

"Are you worried about this child Voldon claims is yours?"

"Hmmm? No." She squirmed a bit, snuggling down, stilling. "It's not mine. You've conquered my heart and taken my virginity."

Well, that's something I didn't think to pay attention to. Whether or not she was a virgin. Damn my hungry beast. It would not be long before the true test with shape shifting helps me get beyond the issue of her allegiance. Rather my fear. I should just wait and call a black hole a black hole. Live honestly like a scared man. But love created so many more problems. Throw in sexual espionage and everything balanced on the brink of death. "Darla?"

She snuggled down against my chest.

"Darla?"

She ignored me or refused to speak. Maybe she was asleep. We definitely needed to get out of the cursed cave.

\* \* \* \*

Goro awoke to a loud clanking inside the cavern. Just what made that ungodly noise, he

wondered. And I'd fallen asleep. Where was Darla? He shoved into a sitting position.

Another mind-numbing clank sounded.

Darla had a flashing blade in hand, beating the rock encasing the glowing crystal.

While I slept. She was definitely entranced by the stone. "By all that is sacred, what are you doing?"

She shot me a stare over her shoulder. "I'm going to take this with us."

Oh no. The universe was deadly enough without a truth stone decorating a man's lodge, staring him down, beating his conscience. "No we are not."

Her lips pursed. "Are you telling me what to do?"

Yes. But she didn't need to hear that admission. "You're not yourself around it."

"But I feel better. Don't you feel better?" She stabbed at the dark rock again.

"Stop this, Darla. You sound drunk. You don't understand what the alien crystal is doing to you." Well, at least she hadn't turned demonic.

She rolled her eyes. "What is it doing to me?"

What a man must do before yanking his pants on. Thank Devros the world isn't coming to an end at the moment. But that accursed stone will run our lives. The free-thinking universe could potentially fall to Voldon because Darla wants a manipulative crystal. If she didn't already work for the bastard. I strode to her side, knelt, and eyed her over.

She'd dressed herself.

What luck given we might have to bolt at any second. I stared into the reflection of the skull in her eyes.

It was as if she was possessed. "This is a Bramyllion skull. It emits radiation that makes humanoids act differently."

"I'm pretty happy. Is something wrong with that?"

Maybe. Yes. No "No. I mean yes." I sighed.

"Look, who's squatting in smelly cave without any pants on? And it's not like you made me all smiles before I fell into this hole." She shook the blade's tip at my nose. "Don't get caught with your pants down."

How did the accursed skull end up here? "Look at the broader picture, Darla."

She turned back to the cave wall. "What picture?"

"The stone and the crystal. The crystal is embedded in the stone. But it should never have been there."

She hacked at the rock. "That's not true. Crystals grow in mineral matrices all the time. Every New Ager knows all about crystals."

Before, she had denied any ideological affiliation outside of science. "Now you're a New Ager?"

"Crystals have energy, Goro. I have strange powers. Energy. I have been around the block in research more times than I can recall." She struck metal to rock again.

Would she not listen? Even if I explained the rock was volcanic, a lava flow, not a mineral? She wouldn't care until I got her out of the crystal's reach and she could think clearly again. I grabbed her wrist.

She locked a mask of disbelief on me.

"Then cease these futile efforts, Darla. Follow me back to the pod fighters. We'll return with tools." And end this futile extraction.

She nodded.

Agreement was something. Even if I lied about why we were departing. Nobody needed

even one Bramyllion Crystal Skull in their possession. Too many people had died trying to balance the delicate energy balance between the thirteen crystals and failed. So many of the fools had been killed by the skulls. Not even the Bramyllions still lived to tell how the energy brought on the demise of their civilization. Maybe giving the last ones to Voldon would end the Blood Wars by allowing him to inadvertently kill himself. Risky. Nobody dared tempt nature's wrath or the tables suddenly turning, even more. If Voldon managed to equalize and control the power between the skulls, he might destroy the remaining worlds opposing his rule. I dragged Darla back to the vine dangling in the hole and shoved her up through a bundle of sunbeams. "I'm right behind you." I pushed her sweet little ass.

"Oh, let me go. I can do this myself."

By the time we made it deep into the forest beyond the hole, Darla fell silent.

What was she thinking? The effect of the skull had to be wearing off. "How do you feel?" I led the way and didn't want to look back to see her reaction.

"Angry."

"Why?"

"That crystal made me feel good. Now I remember you rubbed my nose in my puke. And you wonder why I wandered off and fell in damned hole?"

"I'm sorry, Darla. You can't have that skull. It will kill us."

"How? Why?" she snarled.

"Nobody knows. They were discovered or created so long ago that no one remembers their origin beyond an extinct civilization. We only know they focus energy on people. The reason for that also remains a mystery. You have to trust me." How ironic those words rolled across my tongue. I should be hung from my toes.

Her footsteps halted.

What was she thinking? I turned to her.

She stood among the tall thick tree trunks, looking back.

"Darla, come back to the pod fighter. We'll eat food rations and talk."

She didn't look at me. Nor did she make a sound. She watched the path as if deflated.

The silence nibbled at my honor as much as my lies did.

She headed back to their spacecraft.

When we tore open food-rat packets, she sat beside me and chewed on the standard tasteless military dry protein and carb cake. She was so quiet. Unnervingly silent. What danced in her thoughts? Certainly nothing in memory of our dance in the cave. Why did I want to know? Why was I even thinking about this? Because I must face my fears. Because I have honor. "I don't want to hide anything anymore." I could only watch her chew.

Her mouth kept chewing at her food until she managed a swallow. "I'm twenty-nine years old. I've been abducted by aliens, I use my psychic power to fight an extraterrestrial war most people couldn't even begin to dream up, I'm married to an alien with a strange glowing penis, I've been kidnapped by alien bounty hunters, and a bizarre crystal skull tried to make me feel better. What could you possibly be hiding?"

"I don't believe you're mated to me."



## Chapter Thirteen

Goro's mate studied her protein-carb cake, bit another large bite out of it, rose, walked seven steps, and sat with her back to him. So much for battle, he concluded. Confession truly killed a man slowly and painfully like disembowelment. Even though the sun burned overhead, there was no reason to question the sweat beading upon my brow was anything other than fear. "I suppose I should thank the stars you haven't *impaled* me with something."

She never turned around.

Never moved. Or acknowledged I realized her psychic strength and my fortune in my life being spared. Would she run away again? If she bolted and I never found her, life in a were-form incapable of shifting back without her blood would be eternal damnation. Then again there was always the suicide option.

Maybe I deserve suicide? That much seemed like truth. So no more fear. "Darla, I have no idea what's going on. Voldon claims to have your child sired by him. Did he get your blood first? I cannot know until you require your next blood libation. If you're satisfied with my blood, I will never question you again."

She rose and walked another twelve steps before she sat.

Destiny had to be torturing me. If Darla had lashed out in anger or whipped up a barrage of projectiles with her psychokinesis, I would feel better. But silence only gnashed away at a man's guts. And nobody had the sight to enjoy a warrior's concealed internal bleeding.

\* \* \* \*

Darla waited far from Goro, gnawing on the last bit of his declaration. His cold behavior made sense at long last, she noted. I had puked in my pod fighter and treated the sickness the only way the computer could advise. Of course, this threw a kink in Goro's big plan. He then silently admonished me because he didn't get to observe how his blood would affect me.

So, I'm not his mate? Not quite. Yet. Not until he decides I am? So I'm just supposed to accept these insults and spread 'em on command. Make a hole. Insert a tap in my jugular so he can help himself to the goods when the blood lust comes upon him?

What happened to the solemn powerful alien I fell in love with three years ago? Why had he changed into a worrisome ass? And, God, he thought I was a traitor. I gave up everything in my life but the cells in my body to live confined in a section of his starship. Alone. For him. And now I've given up my cells. For him. Trapped out in the middle of freaking nowhere.

A shadow pushed across the smooth dark rock at her knee.

Goro.

"We must talk. I must make peace with you."

He could have thought that way all along before he falsely accused me. "Why?" I shot his dark face hidden in the sun's shadow a scowl.

He knelt beside me, descending out of the blaring sun. "Because these things between us hurt my honor. I don't want this between us anymore."

Honor? What about my damned feelings? They're part of my honor. So, I'm insignificant. Just a blood bag. "You're kidding. Right?" I sprang to my feet.

He'd have to do more than that to apologize. And an apology wouldn't erase the pain. "You betrayed me. Forgive me for not just bending over and sucking your cock." I pivoted back to the pod fighters.

He grabbed my elbow and yanked me back around to face him. "Darla, I apologize. Everything about me, my very purpose for existence, is for my extinct race. Nobody else can bring them back but I. Nobody else can avenge their deaths but I. Everything I do must be measured against those truths."

So his species is more important to him than I am. So much for love. "I have feelings too. Standards. And I don't appreciate being bonded to a mate who can't see I'm as important as the ghosts haunting him. Hell, Goro, I'm just a piece of nondescript Earth trash in your life." I yanked my arm from his grasp. "Forgive me if I don't cozy up to you for a while after you witness your blood easing my blood lust. I just don't think I can get over this by nightfall. For the record, you blame your issues on honor. I'll blame mine on self-respect. And that's the same damned thing where I come from."

\* \* \* \*

Goro had watched his mate walk back to their spacecraft yesterday and mentally berated himself for his stupidity. With her shoulders thrown back, she wanted self-respect, he noted the irony. Her solid emotionless back strategically poised against me to ward off further self-defeat I could cause her. And she was damned good at protecting herself in the way she ignored me. Even I couldn't hurt her anymore. All because of that skull.

Leaving that skull in the cave was a blessing more so now than ever. Who knew what catastrophe the relic had in store for me after this brutally vicious blow? Yet, Darla hadn't disappeared. But she wouldn't speak.

The silence promised of a reckoning. Any time her blood-lust symptoms could set in. Any fool could see Darla would have her say. She wasn't the type to keep her thoughts to herself. Not like a conniving commander. Maybe her open nature would make things better between us given time. And definitely no more lies. But everything was at stake in the Blood Wars. A wise man would keep his mouth shut.

A wise mate, that is.

There was nowhere to run. She couldn't hide from me unless she lied about being my blood mate. I have to stay rational. I have to ensure my comments are always supportive, not insulting commands. Or this argument would never die. Talk about a slit vein that never clotted and certain death. But given time and Destiny's blessing, my mate will find a way to forgive me.

Die, the argument must.

Especially since we just found a Bramyllion Crystal Skull that Voldon would kill for. But therein lay a bright side. If she worked for Voldon, she would have run off into space with the skull. Created a more dismal situation. Destiny must have ushered us to this place for the sake of free thinkers through my sanity. Voldon is a liar. And yes, a wise Xquine warrior would measure his comments. Try not to sound like a commander, resort to meditation, or die with the rest of my people.

But I'm not alone. Not with Darla.

Although what I was has vanished on an invisible wave of deep space radiation into nothing more than background static noise. Maybe I've tried too hard to rejuvenate a dying breed? Or clung to what I was? Perhaps my mistake lies in my refusing to bend to the ebb and flow of creation. Creation demands the opportunity to flourish. To breathe and pulse. And what can provide this nurturing place for creation to thrive? In sacred marriage, an Xquine warrior's

hope for vengeance will be fostered into something more beautiful and creative.

My seed for love and light.

Although a man would think he's supposed to protect the seed, it's time to stop commanding things to pan out and allow my mate to work with me. And Voldon will die if he attempts to interfere with my Destiny.

\* \* \* \*

Darla choked down a gulp of air and breathed, struggling to hide the surge of nausea billowing up her esophagus while waiting for the chilling sweat beading upon her forehead to evaporate. It will, she mentally insisted, willing the blood lust to vanish. I just have to gulp down the need to hurl. My husband is watching. Dammit, I don't want to just give into him until I can no longer hold back the barrage of blood lust symptoms. He needed to suffer. Grovel. Like the man couldn't put one ounce of faith in me. Like we could afford not to trust each other with Voldon's bounty on our heads. And a husband who had little faith in his mate was a dominant jackass.

God I hate being this pissed off. We're married. We got what we wanted. This is supposed to be a joyous time of our lives. What happened?

And the blood lust bumped up commitment to vital need.

Happily together? No. Together nonetheless. And he thinks I'm just going to forget he can't trust me?

Another wave of acidic nausea bubbled toward the back of my throat.

I almost fell onto my hands, but caught myself.

Had he noticed? I sat down on the hard rocky volcanic plain where I could monitor his movements in my peripheral vision. To try to conceal my misery.

He monkeyed with something metallic, a small object or two.

Good. Stay busy.

A breeze tickled the sweat on my brow.

A chilly wave of nausea surged through me.

I can't take much more of this. But he doesn't deserve my help. He can stew as long as he chooses.

Nausea threw me onto my palms and arched my back in the most violent of yoga positions.

Wave after wave of disgusting bile spewed from my lips.

His black boots were suddenly beside my elbow. Waiting. When the godforsaken heaving ceased.

Bile dripped from my chin.

I wiped the bitter acid with the back of my hand and shoved back to sit on my butt.

He knelt in one quick seamless motion and offered a glinting blade coated with deep red beads. "There's no sense in your suffering for hours until I require a blood libation."

Of course that's what he wanted.

His answer. With his blood. His essence.

That poison on my lips would be the last thing I ever tasted. Humiliating. Sweet. Salty. Metallic ambrosia. But delicacies a person craved often killed them. Whether slowly or quickly. His blood wouldn't be the end of me. Today. I shoved his arm away. "Leave me alone."

Another chill curdled the void in my gut.

God. I'm being punished for something. How have I been in the wrong? I have honored the life I was given by making choices for the greater good. For what? To live in eternal

damnation? Oh the paradox.

My breathing quickened until all I could do was lie on my side and count the ridges beneath my palms in the volcanic rock until the barrage of dry heaves set in.

\* \* \* \*

His mate ignored his presence to the point Goro felt like thrusting his thumb coated with his blood between her lips. But that just seemed so barbaric, he concluded. So Xquine-out-of-control warrior. Anything but civilized and loving. Rape. By Devros, I was going to make her beg for my companionship again. One day. Besides, she'd probably bite off the digit. I retrieved a syringe carrying my blood and shot her in the arm.

She flinched.

Her rigid body relaxed almost immediately.

My mate. *Truth*. A stubborn woman who'd rather agonize nearby instead of prove her innocence. Just like an Xquine. Too proud to just get the test over with.

She wouldn't roll back to face me.

She'd have to eventually.

Or I'd lose my mind. What would life be like as one never-ending act of harvesting one's blood in necessary celibacy because the woman a man love despises him? This relationship was no longer about defeating Voldon and conquest. Now the battle was about winning Darla back to stand at my side. Whether our enemy might be, nature, humanoid, or Destiny, we must band together. If that entailed endless apologies. So be it. I gently curled my fingers around her stiffened elbow. "Come now, Darla, I'm sorry, but we have our answer."

She jerked her elbow out of my grasp. "That's only a drop in the bucket."

## Chapter Fourteen

So, Destiny had other plans for our reconciliation, Goro mused and crouched at his mate's hip where she snarled at him without even casting him the courtesy of an acidic glance. But was her reaction anything other than strength—what a man expected from a female who must survive in a strange new world consumed by the Blood Wars? She had to be tough. Abrasive. She had to defy everything that insulted her. She had to demand respect. She had to become Crazy Darla. Not that Crazy Darla didn't appeal to me. But I had the luxury of knowing the soft woman beneath that façade. That Earth girl was who I fell in love with. That loving genuine Darla whose faith in the good of humanity would nurture any of their Earth-Xquine children. Especially the child of legend. And all I need do is fly straight and true. Like bring Darla some wash water.

That was my test. To remain steadfast. I rose to retrieve water.

\* \* \* \*

When that kneeling alien handed her a large cup filled with water, Darla just stared at the drops lacing the bottom edge of her mate's hand with glistening pearls. His fingernails had been scraped white. Clean, unlike his soul, she thought. As if he had scratched at them awaiting my moment of truth with the blood lust. And now he extended a peace offering. I shouldn't accept it. But the bile's bitterness in my mouth would only eat away the enamel of my teeth. Since I haven't seen any signs of dental facilities in outer space, I'd better take care of my pearly whites. I reached for the glass.

Without so much as an apology, he extracted a syringe and shot up.

Bastard. He could have gone off to cop a cheap thrill behind a bush or someplace.

"When you're ready, we need to confront the wormhole relay." He rose and walked to his pod fighter.

Just what everybody needs—another confrontation. Or was this some sort of free-thinking readiness test. Why so soon? Didn't he want to hang around and relax on this paradise with his mate? No. He was all business. Boy I read this guy wrong. I rinsed out my mouth, washed my face, and poured the last bit of cleansing water over my hands.

But why did we need to rush? His fear of Voldon capturing us had to be his motive. Not that his fear stemmed from his love for me. Without me, Goro's life was on the line. From now on, our relationship was about him using me for survival.

*Blood.* So much for a marriage of love. Love must be thinner like water.

I'd fallen in love during war time with a charismatic military commander like every stupid female who had wound up hovering over a white-knuckled clench of a fist, praying for a way out of her madness only to realize there was nothing else she could do but give birth to a child in the wilderness.

Okay. Maybe I'm not pregnant yet. But I might as well be given I'm stuck out here in the middle of nowhere outer space. The wild woods. And his love is thin like water, not thick as blood.

God, I am just a naïve flower girl from Earth. I'm so damned weak. I fell for the champion boxer. And now I'm staring at his face, wondering if when the swelling goes down, if he'll be the same man I fell in love with all those years ago. Because he certainly is acting like his brain is hemorrhaging. Will he just die? Only a fool would continue to follow him into the

unknown mystery of space.

Time to stop being the fool. A stupid woman wouldn't stand up for herself. Time to demand everything I need for a good life from the man I've mated. If he wants me to give birth to his child of legend, he's going to have to work for the perk. He's going to wish he had brought that shiny mate-placating skull with him. I would have been more agreeable high on crystal energy.

"Darla, we must go," he yelled out to me.

More like we must talk. I rose, crossed the space between us, and halted beneath his questioning gaze. "Just what's the rush? And why in the Hell do I need to follow you anywhere?"

"We're mated."

Shoot me, universe. I ended up with the blunt guy. At least, he spared me one of his typical philosophical replies. But this gal needs more info. "I asked you why we have to go now."

His questioning mask barely twisted with amusement.

"Stop laughing and cough up some answers. I swear you've put a lot of stock in me not commanding my pod fighter to take me wherever I want to go."

His eyes pinched ever so slightly. "Now, Darla, we have no choice. To stay here is to lure Voldon to the skull. The last thing The Cause needs is a bastard using the power of those skulls on his zombified populace."

That answer made no sense. "You said the skull could make people happy. Why is that a bad thing?"

"I chose you because you could think, Darla. You must think beyond your anger now."

Was he joking? Destiny certainly worked a number on these extraterrestrials. I rolled my eyes. "I am thinking. That's the problem. Now allow me to paraphrase. Why is Voldon using the skull to make the people happy a bad thing?" There had to be something scientific behind all the contradictions.

He exhaled slowly. "Because their ability to think freely is still masked. Look at how the skull made you feel. Would you wish such a Destiny on the powerless?"

"What a redundant question. I'm pretty damned powerless, Goro!"

His lips turned down in the faintest of frowns. "If I had known before we mated that you would consider yourself powerless when our marriage gifted you the most empowering aspect of life in the universe, I wouldn't have allowed you to enter the contract. For that, I apologize."

His unyielding stare cut through me.

What did he expect? Applause? He was no different than Voldon in enslaving others. I get to become a were-wolf. Not that it has any appealing qualities. I'm not that into kicking ass. But that doesn't make my future glitter with gold. My future was about finding a place for myself with him. "You're kidding, right?"

"I only hear you speaking with anger now. You'll step out of it soon and understand—"

Do I have to walk away to find some reason? I turned.

"But I have a job to do, Darla." He grabbed my elbow again just to stop me. "And my crew awaits my return. I had thought you might want to show them how sane you really are. Revel in your own victory. You have beaten Voldon at his game. But that was a thought I had before I realized how miserable you feel with my blood coursing through your veins."

And wouldn't my contradictory behavior send the crew off on a mutiny? I met his gaze. "All I see in my future is trouble. For example, shouldn't I remain abrasive and volatile?"

Menacing? Anything to carry on what you've already started. And what about shape shifting? Talk about turning into an uncontrollable beast. I'm supposed to feel like I have the upper hand? I'm sorry, I'm not the genius you are—a man worthy of commanding a starship in The Cause's fleet. I'm just dumb Earth girl, a flower girl, Darla. And Darla is tired of being treated like the bitch slave of a psychic asshole. Excuse me, Goro, but you still haven't convinced me that your dragging me back through that wormhole is worth the loss of more of my brain cells."

Only a moment passed before he blinked. "When we think we have mastered the lesson life dealt us, we see another mount jutting toward the heavens in the distance. For what it's worth, all you need ask is for explosives, and I would destroy your looming mountain. But Voldon's mountain cannot be conquered so easily, heart of my heart. If my fears laid in keeping you alive, I wouldn't have mated with you. Your strength lies in your power and your convictions. Where else in the world would I have found a woman who defied the very breath her father gave her? You are the only female who would challenge me enough to keep me alive and secure freedom of thought for our child. Peer deeply inside yourself and see if you truly feel you have no control. I bet you will discover you haven't looked very far. Eyes that cannot see do nothing for the soul."

What was he yammering about like some Zen Master as if I needed a freaking lecture for a pep rally? "You know, Goro. You're still a jackass."

He nodded once with so much gratitude I could have yanked his head off.

"Sometimes the only thing that saves our life is our demeanor." He met my gaze. "Will you fly with me back to prove to Voldon that we walk with Destiny?"

"I don't believe that crap at the moment. The truth of the matter is that my existence relies on blood fucking. I'm not so thrilled about being your puppet right now."

"Is the glass half empty or half full?" His pontificating gaze waited for her answer.

Why is he playing these games with me? "I'm not your crew, Goro. Stop treating me like a cook, pilot, or healer. I'm your mate now, and I want some god-damned respect. Just cut the philosophical crap and cuss if that's all you can do. But make some fucking sense."

"See why I married you."

No, things still look pretty fuzzy. "No."

"You don't play games with me. That's all the comfort Destiny needs afford me in my journey to defeat evil."

"And who just got burned playing games with his mate? It ought to be entertaining seeing if you learned any lessons." She pivoted to her pod fighter, climbed aboard, and shoved into position. "Computer, follow Goro." I'll just follow because my roadmap to the universe is departing.

\* \* \* \*

Bless Devros, his mate cooperated. But Goro knew she could lose her sanity any moment and head off on a suicidal jaunt through the universe. That much was evident in her lengthy speech. So Destiny strived to test my fealty with my mate. The wormhole relay spat them out near Jupiter, right next to the third-largest moon Callisto. Saturn's Titan was but an earthly hop, skip, and a jump away. They could land at The Cause's secret subterranean habitat hidden on Titan or just scout out a starship. One way or the other, finding a connection to The Cause in order to reestablish my command status was crucial. Should Arken be informed of the skull's location? That tidbit might secure my next command assignment. But what of my crew? Had they been dispersed among other starships? Reassigned?

Certainly.

War rarely proved merciful while having its way with people. I turned back to my view of Titan.

The hazy atmosphere would offer shelter long enough to set the wheels of Destiny back in motion for a commander estranged from his command. The Cause's enclosed habitat was a sheltering place to rest and recoup with access to various amenities nature couldn't offer. Those luxuries might help Darla cool down enough to listen to reason. "Computer, land at X3-Beta. If Darla's pod doesn't follow, pursue her."

If Darla ran from me now, she was suicidal. But a month's worth of my blood would buy her some precious thinking time. She could survive that long. Reason out her situation. Find me in her heart. Somewhere in there. Even an Xquine warrior had positive qualities a mate could embrace. Or not. The only other cure for the blood lust is death. Hopefully, she'd prove herself strong enough to see the light.

The bluish haze of Titan's thick atmosphere greeted with promise of a gentle world like earth. A wicked mantle of deceit. Nobody could survive outside in its negative three-hundred-and-fifty-five-degree temperature. Except liquid methane. And methane cared nothing about its state of existence. Those methane lakes and rivers were toxic.

But somewhere in Titan's gentle façade, near the solid frozen water referred to as land on Titan, beyond those thousand-foot high sand dunes belting the moon's equator, The Cause found the brutally frozen and lifeless satellite welcoming.

No irony today, universe.

By the time the docking bay's door vented Titan's nitrogen atmosphere from the well-lit manmade cavern, more than hope gleamed upon the metallic rafters and glistening walls. The docking bay's fortification reminded all who entered that The Cause strived to keep more than Titan's freezing atmosphere outside.

Two white-garbed station workers stepped through the door leading into the compound.

Docking technicians with a casual all-business stride. Nobody would think the enemy arrived in pod fighters. Or so their countenance revealed. "Open the hatch, computer."

The men moved toward the pods.

I thrust up into the cool air and swung a leg down toward the stone floor.

The crew members halted, shooting a questioning glance between themselves.

The sight of an Xquine warrior, full mane and weapons, still struck fear among the masses. Xquine was anything but dead.

"I'm Commander Goro," I announced with my mouth for Darla's sake. Yes, maybe using the military title was a bit premature. I jumped, landing my boots squarely on the solid rocky surface of Titan with a thump. "I've come to commune with the priest."

Neither lunar-station's worker did anything to indicate the idea was untimely.

The tallest, a thin redhead, nodded once. "Commander," he replied in English.

So if they knew I'd lost my command, they were accommodating. Wise given Xquine males were known for fits of rage. Well, those who hadn't trained to fight for Destiny.

Darla's boots hit the deck with a thump.

"And this is my charge," I stated in the loudest menacing and commanding tone I could muster. "Nobody touches her."

\* \* \* \*

*Had Goro just protected me?* Darla felt strangely warm where she stood beside her mate before the two crewmen in Titan's docking bay. I kind of liked the way he handled that situation. Why did he suddenly behave differently though? Maybe the problem was we were



alone before. Maybe when we're alone he's more open? No way. Goro is not vulnerable at the hands of his mate. This could prove an interesting theory to test. Just give me some time, universe.

Lightheadedness of nausea made me feel like I had to belch.

Was that the first sign of blood lust? Since we were on Titan, Goro could take care of it. Any way I wanted him to.

## Chapter Fifteen

The workers pivoted back toward the docking bay's entrance, never relinquishing their gazes on Goro. Well, we would be safe now with food, lodging, and a door to lock, he noted. I can find out what the Jennian priest knows about my position in the fleet too.

"This way, commander." The redhead pointed toward the exit. "Shandul is in the garden."

One day, that old priest's meditation would set off a chain reaction and the whole damned moon would turn into a tropical indulging paradise like the not-so-distant Earth.

Darla walked at Goro's side through the winding well-lit corridors, never inquiring about the Jennian hieroglyphics Shandul's earliest predecessor had carved into the stony inner workings of X3-Beta.

Perhaps she connected with the curved symbols' message of understanding and harmony on her own? Would that be a miracle given the thick suffocating tension between them? Maybe Titan was the perfect place to bring her since Jennian priests never stopped toiling for peace. Never stopped expressing their goal to bring tranquility to the disturbed.

The redhead led them toward the door marked with the star-shaped Jennian symbol of serenity.

The metal sheet slid right.

Bright light poured through the doorway.

Of course, brighter than sunlight because the light radiated off the priest, Shandul. He was a gardener of various sorts, laboring to conjure life from the darkest of recesses whether using natural light or his own. By the looks of the blinding rays shooting across the threshold, the Jennian priest obviously struggled to pierce through some shadow with his alien radiance.

The priest stood in the center of the round cavern, staring overhead at the glass ceiling. His garden was his greenhouse.

"*Leave us,*" Shandul ordered in mindpeak, without tearing his gaze from his vigil.

The workers left us squinting in the wake of the priest's brilliance.

What was Shandul's point for privacy? "*Thank you for seeing us so quickly, Shandul. I ask you not speak with mindpeak given my companion cannot.*" I bowed the obligatory greeting in which one honored a Jennian priest.

"*Very well.*" The Jennian's form radiated so much white light that its body merely took the shape of a shaft with a thin neck and upturned face. A shaft anchored to the stony spot where he stood. Shandul lowered his gaze, turning his pointed nose toward Darla. "So much has happened since you disappeared, Goro."

Something accusatory danced among the Jennian's carefully-selected words. A point that omitted any note of my rank. But nobody is going to slit my throat for saving my mate. "Who else would have saved my mate?"

Shandul's light dimmed enough so that the meditating manner in which he held his hands clasped before him could be seen. He nodded his smooth hairless head and blinked his clear blue eyes. "I wondered if the universe would have to wait forever until you embraced your destiny."

Another invisible blow. But who could fault a being who strived to bring peace to free thinkers? Whether an insult or merely a point for my personal reflection, Shandul's comment

was worth contemplating.

Shandul's gaze slid to Darla. "What does the future hold?"

He probably spoke of the child of legend.

"Are you telling me some psychics are soothsayers?" Darla snapped.

Her rudeness was best kept in check.

Shandul's mouth twisted with a smile. "Can you imagine how the powers of the universe would shift given that psychic gift?"

Hopefully, Darla took that as a no.

"I've been dragged all over the universe by more than one nutcase, thank you. Please just get to the point," Darla demanded.

My heart sank at the rudeness.

She no longer harbored any fear. Who was the Xquine warrior now?

Shandul slid his cutting gaze back to meet mine. "I can see Destiny matched you both well."

Truth. He nodded instead of throwing oil on Darla's fire.

"After you've sought accommodations for your layover, I will speak with you privately, Goro."

Blessed Devros, that was the only way I'd be able to carry on a thought provoking discussion and learn if there was any chance in having my command reinstated.

\* \* \* \*

Back in their quarters, Goro took the full force of his mate's disgust while ignoring the nagging itch of blood lust beneath his hide. Would Darla not calm down and speak sensibly yet, he wondered. How long would she carry on with this anger? I caused her resentment though. I had to deal with the consequences of my actions. Even when blood lust muted all of my patience into irritation.

"Just who does that glowing bastard think he is forbidding me from attending your private meeting?" She whirled to face me in our personal quarters.

Was her irrational behavior had to be more a reflection of her rising blood lust? The tingling under my skin was only the first symptom. And if I felt it, she did too. Would she listen to reason now under the influence of anger? Or lies fabricated to soothe her anger? "Jennian priests think their interrogation tactic of separating people is far superior to group interrogation." That half truth might work on my behalf.

Her brow furrowed. "He thinks he's going to catch us lying? What do we have to lie about? After the sex spy issue, there's really nothing left to hide." Her straightened spine seemed to relax a fraction of a fraction.

That jab wouldn't pierce my armor. She should try to focus on serious issues. Like maybe the way we played my crew for three years. Or the skull. "We will never know. I'll tell him anything he wishes. His rank requires we give him that respect. All was done for the greater good of The Cause. You should do the same."

Her noisy exhalation only expressed her unwavering disgust. She turned, crossed her arms, and paced a bit along a long solid smooth rock wall away from the only piece of furniture in the space, the standard bare bones bed with thermal cover.

My mate will always be frustrated. If only she would react to my touch. Calm herself from the blood lust. Lovemaking did that for mates. Oh to nibble on her white neck. Sweet salty skin.

His mouth drooled.

The hunger. That had to be her problem. And the solution was even more obvious. I followed her.

Grit ground beneath the soles of his boots.

She turned to me, arms crossed defensively over her breasts.

My breasts. If those treasures trapped any love for me inside her heart, those barrier arms didn't show it. What lay therein? I stopped a step from the scuffed black toes of her boots.

"Darla, I'm sorry I brought you here. I'm sorry you're scared and confused. But this place isn't about us breaking any free-thinking law in finding ourselves through sacred marriage. This place is only about me and my command. I came here to get that issue clarified as soon as possible. I want my command back. I want you safely by my side where I can protect you. And we will defeat Voldon."

Her jaw dropped. "You're serious? You marry me then plan to go chasing Voldon all over the universe? Drop me right into his bloody hands? What'll he do to me the minute he finds out I've mated with you? And what am I supposed to do alone? I don't know anything about the freaking universe."

The rapid rise and fall of her breasts only warned she was on the verge of yelling. Nothing productive would spring from that behavior. She needed a distraction. Something to change the tone of our relationship. A peace offering. I nodded the obligatory exit bow and hustled to the door before she exploded.

"Where are you going? You didn't answer me. And I didn't say you could leave."

She didn't? Should I laugh? I pivoted to face her.

She walked toward me, eyebrows pinched, arms swaying near her sashaying hips.

The blood lust had to be talking.

She walked up to me, slid her palms up my chest, grabbed my cheeks, and pulled my lips down to her warm soft mouth.

How timely.

All the blood in my body raced to my loins.

Well, chores would have to wait. I grabbed her ass and crushed her soft curves to my chest. Against my aching arousal.

She gasped into my mouth. "Goro."

This was no time for talking. I sucked my name into nothingness with one deep breath and thrust my tongue into her demanding mouth.

Her hands worked at my pants.

We'd get nowhere without stopping to undress. I pushed her away and focused on stripping.

How she undressed herself before I yanked off my shirt and pulled my manhood free would remain a mystery. But some mysteries didn't need solving the way her palms raced across my ass. She lured my shaft up from an at-ease position to standing at attention without nary a touch, and she stood there watching it bob in full extension while she squeezed my butt.

Darla should have been a sex spy.

Her fingers curled around my engorged shaft and pulled me with a gentle firmness that somehow led me to the bed because I found himself lying on my back with my mate riding my ballooning penis. And I so wanted to just let her take what she wanted. *But she had to be safe.*

"Darla, you must stop," I gasped.

"Why?" she groaned, rising and squeezing my eyesight into failure. "I just want to ride you." Her hot moist silkiness sank back down to my lap. Again. And again. "If I'm your wife, I

get to,” she gulped with her eyes shut, “enjoy this.”

Did she really mean enjoy *something*? I opened his eyes to find her smiling like the huntress who’d made her first kill. So, I’ll let her have what she wants this time. Appease her. And in the end, we both get our blood lust satiated for a while.

\* \* \* \*

Darla thought the universe would explode in one enormous gush of brilliant stars as she gyrated her hips on her mate’s lap. He was trapped inside of her, enormous, firm, and his cock was doing that vibrating-tickle thing. Pulsing. Over and over. She bit back her cries and just worked his hardness in amazing circles.

If sex was all I would get out of this relationship, I’m taking whatever I can. Even if it felt like I suffocated when I desperately tried to gasp for breath during sex. It wasn’t like I was going to die from it.

Goro’s neck arched back with his chest, and he roared another deep dark jungle sound. The sound of triumph.

Glad I could make your day. I raised up along the solid length of him that would allow for some movement and contracted her vaginal muscles one last time.

His hands slid around her waist and pulled her down atop his drumming chest. “Dear Gods, Darla, you are truly magical.” He pumped and pumped her, slamming his soft body right up against her tender vagina.

Why don’t I feel magical? I just feel like a woman who got lucky. Very lucky the way he keeps pumping me, slowly easing off as if he couldn’t stop but had to. Like he treasured being inside me. I snuggled into his beating heart and ran a fingertip around the silky ring encircling his beaded nipple.

Would I ever feel like he was more than the boss? With mind-blowing sex, I can forgive him soon. But I want more. I want him to love me in his actions.

\* \* \* \*

I’ll be back he said, Darla recalled, pacing back toward the bed, past a large circular fire pit composed of something that had to be ceramic. Goro could have answered some questions about our future before just leaving. Before walking his sexy body away after taking care of the blood lust his actions instigated. God how the sex felt amazing.

My heart melted.

How he could warm up my soul. My gaze slid to the pit holding large crystals that glowed a bright orange. As orange as Goro’s eyes. But not as warming.

Oh the way he looked at me when those eyes flared while they were making love. Can sex be called love? Sex with Goro? At least the sex makes it worth my time spent in his protection.

So, I’m trapped underground on a freaking moon with a man who drives me crazy with anger until he starts looking at me with those flaming eyes. And we do the wild thing. What have I gotten myself into?

Well he is just going to start having to do more. More than sex, universe. He’s going to have to wine me and dine me. If that’s even possible underground on Titan. Something’s going to have to give if he wants to get some respect. Because I’m about to siphon all of his respect off onto me. And he can start by marching those clickety clacking boots back in here with answers. Or at least confess the great mystery behind his departure.

\* \* \* \*

Nobody needed to inform Goro how his mate needed more than his touch. He knew that

much from focusing on Earth cultures in his studies to choose a were-mate. She needed a gift. A peace offering. I clutched the wisp of long Nirvellan silk in my hands that I had replicated in Titan blue, the color of the moon from space. A bit of a memory she could easily stuff into a storage compartment inside her pod fighter. Or don't to feel as exotic as the gown.

The gown was long, fluid, light as mist that hugged a stream. And Darla's curves were that stream. And the color was so soothing, healing, calming. Perfect for her. If only she'd accept the gown as a peace offering. We could begin the discussion of our future once again. In gentle rational terms.

Or so gifts of fine textiles worked on other females in the universe. If not, I'd just go about sex and blood libation the way things seemed to be working. Mask the blood lust with mating. I stepped toward the sliding doorway to our personal quarters.

She stood by the orange heating crystals.

Our gazes met.

"I've found what I was looking for." I crossed the rocky floor between us.

She quietly watched as if she wondered why I returned.

So she was somewhat cooperative. I extended the silk.

"What is it?" She just looked at the cloth.

"A gown. A gift for you. A peace offering." Hopefully, she would take the gift.

She sighed and reached for the dress. "I just want some answers. Can you provide some answers?" She eyeballed me with a weary mask.

Was her blood lust already bothering her? Well, the gown might work after satiating the blood lust. I could use some touch of creamy pale skin.

Xquine women were tanned. Sun-kissed the way Darla had been when I brought her aboard. Something about her softened coloring had to be a sign. An omen of some sort, perhaps, to be gentle with her. But the gown would fit her coloring perfectly. And she wasn't running the other direction. I slid my fingers against her firm jaw line.

She clenched her teeth.

Stubborn little thing.

Her pale skin was so warm.

All of my blood drained to my loin.

What thoughts whirled behind those deep dark brown eyes?

"Don't you dare shave your head," she said.

So she had a preference? "If that is your wish." If only she would press her velvet lips to mine of her own accord.

Those lips parted.

Oh to touch them. I traced a thumb across the soft edge of her lower lip, circling around the upper lip's edge to where the pad began its journey.

"I don't want to go back to being a rat in your cage. I don't want to be your pawn in some ridiculous game anymore. I can't. I don't trust you." Her gaze slid to my lips. "Kiss me, Goro."

Gods to dip between those lips. To take my time. Only a fool would. Shandul was waiting. And Devros knows how a Jennian priest's sight can peer into a person's soul, knowing what they've been up to. Going to Shandul after mating once was risky, but twice might make me look like I'm not serious enough about reclaiming my command because I'd rather be mating. My gaze met her glinting eyes. "I have to see what Shandul wants first. Then, I am yours."

She back stepped, staring at me with the most all-knowing gaze I'd ever witnessed. "Go then. Back to duty. Shave your head. Marry a starship. Hook me up to a machine where you can suck this sack of blood dry. I'll just sit here and wait until you have time for me. Because I'm just your pawn." She turned and walked away.

A man couldn't turn away from those begging eyes. Those wanting lips. But her words cut more deeply than a falling battleaxe. To squeeze the pain from her brow. To shake some sense into her. Or pound it into her soul that I loved her. And I had just the tool to achieve success. Actions always spoke louder than words, they say. My mate needed me more than a Jennian priest. And Shandul's own words noted his knowledge of our mating. Shandul could meditate a bit longer.

\* \* \* \*

Gooseflesh prickled to chilly attention on Darla's skin as the whisper of footfalls heralded her mate's approach. He hadn't been gone that long this time. And he returned with gifts. Not to mention, he seemed pretty impressionable here inside the moon. Was that an aspect of his vulnerability since they mated? Vulnerable people were easily swayed into cooperating. She noted. Cooperation was a good sign to a woman who mated with the man who awed her for years. Seduced me. Made me fantasize about spreading my legs. It was as if I could think of nothing but his cock inside me. Hard. Pounding. Taking what he desired. And I loved being the object of his desire.

The footsteps halted behind my back.

Looking at him would be giving in. Waiting to see his reaction translated into power. I'll just wait to see what happens.

His gentle hands slid around my waist with a firm touch and pulled me into his hard chest, where a drum beat wildly. Below that thrashing sensation rested something harder.

We just had sex but two hours ago. Was this the sign of something more hidden inside the indomitable commander? Could he have real feelings for me beyond what he the basic necessities blood lust requires from me? Hopefully he'd just rip my clothes off and take me like in all of those romance movies.

Something warm tickled across my ear.

His nose by the warm breath buffeting my skin.

"Forgive me, Darla, heart of my heart." His hot breath begged I stand still. "I've always been a leader. Never have I shared command." His hands slowly teased, sliding up to gently cup my breasts.

God, I hate clothes. He was so warm. So close. Command him? All that hot corded muscle. I turned into his neck and ran my palms down the length of his undulating arms.

He inhaled deeply with his nose tucked into my hair.

What if I just walked away? Showed him how it felt to be a piece of toilet paper stuck to somebody's boot? But here stood the toughest free-thinking leader held hostage by my whims. Talk about power. But what did that mean to a woman married to such a renowned warrior? He was a creature of war. A conqueror. Would the conqueror behave like a beast if I said no?

His electrifying fingers finely tuned my nipples like electronics' dials into the tautest peaks.

Now I know how he managed all those conquests. Take me. Chain me. Ravish me. I slid my hands across the warm leather covering his solid chest, thrusting my fingers into his wild hair, and locked my lips against his warm mouth.

Our kiss deepened.

No words were spoken as I tilted my mouth up to his welcoming tongue.  
All was implied through touch and taking.

And I damned sure meant to take everything after he put his hands on me. He owed me that much by now.

He hoisted me up without freeing my lips, carrying me back to the simple bed, carefully placing me on the soft bedding, leaning over my body, his hair hanging down to drag across my bare arm.

Cut off my clothes. Ram into me. I spread my legs invitingly.

He groaned, leaned down between my knees, and rubbed his palm across my mound, shooting me a serious stare as if he could feel the silken hairs beneath my leather pants. The orange light in his eyes glowed a brighter hue as if he read my mind. Or warned his inner beast awoke.

Unleash the beast.

‘If you don’t take off your clothes, I’m going to cut them off,’ he warned.

Anything to feel him inside me. I fumbled with my clothes while shoving up with my elbows.

Moments blurred before he shoved my nude body back down into the soft bedding and latched onto my nipple, those moist warm lips sucking with the softest pressure.

Thank the stars for sharing the wonders of the universe with me. I arched my breast into his nibbling teeth, into the barrage of shivers that made me tremble beneath his strumming heart. God, every time he latched onto me, it was as if he’d done it for the first time, making me ache with the deepest need right where his thigh pressed against my clit. I rubbed against that supple muscle until his leg was damp with *need*.

A deep chuckle rumbled in his chest. He wormed his fingers beneath my knee and locked it solidly at my side with one of his knees.

Why is sex always a lockdown? “Goro, don’t.”

Too late, his hand shoved my other knee up to lock it in place in one of the swiftest motions, so quick that he never had to unlatch from my breast.

And how wonderfully his mouth teased my nipple.

One way or another, he would make me feel amazing.

His hand slid down the length of my inner thigh, along the tender ticklish spot, to put a thumb against the silken hairs where my leg and groin joined.

I grabbed for two handfuls of bedcover to brace against the dogmatic *need* to gasp and buck. Since bucking was impossible and the effort futile.

His lips kissed a trail of gooseflesh across my breast to suck the other nipple into the longest point imaginable.

Watching his mouth on my breasts while he studied me with those fiery eyes set my heart racing. And watching him pin me into position with his massive muscular body ready, poised to claim me, proved life truly had purpose.

His fingers tickled into my tender folds, searching, digging, one pad pressing then circling my nub.

I squirmed and bit back a squeal.

Need ached so deeply inside me I doubted he could ever quench it. He’d kill me if he didn’t thrust his incredible hardness into my soul. Hard. Fast. Slow. Gentle. Anything would be better than this agonizing abomination of making me come without him. As if he wanted me to stop nagging him about sex and just use the damned syringe. Grinding the back of my head



into the bedding, I struggled to hold my breath, to force back the tremors of an orgasm.

But denial was impossible. If only I could move my hips. "Please, Goro. Please. I need you inside me."

"Why?" he growled.

To tell him I wanted it or needed it to feel whole wasn't exactly what he deserved to hear. Why confess how much I relied on him for sex after he lied to me? Still, he owed me completion after getting me trapped in this insane marriage.

His finger thrust inside me.

Dear God, I couldn't breathe. I clamped my vaginal muscles along the length of it, daring him to hold back any longer. But my shoulders shot off the bed, curling me up to meet his gaze as if some power in the universe demanded I admit my love.

He waited, his orange gaze ablaze, staring. "Why?"

He just owed me what a man owes his mate. Was what I felt love? He betrayed me. And admitting my needs to him now was betraying myself. I leaned my head back to the bed. "I'm going to die if you don't fuck me."

Stony hardness washed over his features. He shoved my shoulders onto the bed, thrust inside me without easing into the motion, and threw his head back, thrusting. Lunging.

Filling my womb with blessed pressure. At long last. I sighed.

He pounded and throbbed until his grunts matched my cries for breath, until the universe racked with unimaginable bliss that only two lovers could sense.

Even if we were just fucking.

He fell atop me, still engorged inside me, and ground out a few dying pumps.

Only a fool would speak of love until her mate revealed his feelings to her. Would spoken words of love even make a difference now?

\* \* \* \*

Goro pulled his spent manhood from his mate's body and rose to find his pants. Anything to find a quiet place to center oneself, he thought. To meditate. Would she ever come to respect me or my needs? Why had I wasted time dabbling with a replicator to present her with a gown?

"Are you leaving?" she asked, sprawled behind him on the bedding.

What did she care? Her choice of words said it all. She was his fucking bag. Since I'd lost my mate to mating, I might as well get back to resurrecting *The Seeker*. "I need to report to Shandul." Get back to seeking Voldon's demise. Talk about a debt to repay. The bastard had turned my mate against me. I stepped into my boots and stamped my heels down to the soles.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked with a hint of curiosity edging her words.

That's probably what she wanted to hear. "Not in the least." I yanked my shirt over my head and pulled the hem down to my waist.

"Then why are you running away?"

Retreat? Xquine males never run away. I turned to her limp body, nipples broad and flat in satiated pleasure, her legs still lying where I wanted them, right where a man could mount his woman and sow more seed. She sprawled right on top of the accursed Titan blue gown.

More or less I was running. And only a fool would avoid a Jennian priest. "Shandul's challenged me."

She shoved onto an elbow. "You call that light being a *challenge*? I've never heard about these priests before. What does he hold over your head?"

Actually, marriage is more of a challenge. So was winning respect where it was lost.

“Our future.” I nodded and strode out the door to meet with Shandul.

Am I wrong in expecting more from Darla? I am the cause of her resentment. My own weakness. The fear of losing. I should have given her more deference. She deserved reverence. And now I’ve trapped myself in a marriage no man would wish on another. For what? To beat Voldon at his game. Actually, for the greater good of all sentient beings. Why can’t Darla see that? Gaining back my command should help her see that I’m doing what’s best for everyone.

The Jennian being of light still meditated in his garden.

What was life to one so wise that I did little other than espouse truths to bring all things to fruition?

A presence pushed into Goro’s mind.

*“I wondered when you would return.”* Shandul turned away from his sojourn at the ceiling’s window and lowered his radiance to a bearable dose.

I claimed a spot steps from the priest and assumed an at-ease stance. Why lie? The Jennian priest didn’t even need to probe a person’s mind for answers. *“Sometimes, a mate can be demanding.”*

Shandul nodded. *“I have oft wondered how a man with your responsibilities would take to mating. Rise to the challenge? But the greatest challenge of all is learning to let go of your control. Each of us doesn’t need to take on the weight of the universe. Share the load. Delegate.”*

It was good to see the Jennian priesthood thought I was significant enough to ponder my existence during meditation.

*“However, marriage will work for you if you allow it to,”* Shandul stated.

Father’s words echoed from the depths of my subconscious: *it has long been said that doubters never hear the song of crashing waves because they fear being consumed by the surf.* I nodded. *“Are you privy to something of which I claim no knowledge?”*

Shandul stepped sideways and sighed. *“Some would say yes. Others would say I have no advice to offer in the realm of marriage since Jennians never wed.”*

So he knows nothing of my future.

*“But what does marriage have to do with anything when you’re seeking your command?”* Shandul added.

Jennian priests could be extremely unnerving. *“I have returned to reclaim my command.”* Did announcing the obvious make a difference?

Jennian wagged his head. *“No. No, Goro. You no longer serve The Cause in that fashion.”*

Was this some accursed joke?

## Chapter Sixteen

"No, Goro," the Jennian priest said in mindspeak. *"Your service has always been to Destiny. And serve her you must, or you and I have toiled away our lives on hopes and promises of freedom with nothing more than legends to share with the children."*

Of what did he speak? My service was a lie? Or would he get around to mentioning my dishonor?

My heart slammed into my throat.

No fear would enter this sacred garden. I gulped back the traitorous organ. *"I am a commander. I command."*

*"All these pains, we bring them upon ourselves."* Jennian threw up a gleaming white palm. *"Argue no further. Return to your quarters. Think upon my words. You must. For the free-thinking universe hinges upon your acceptance of your Destiny. To command means you endanger your mate or yourself. The unborn child is our salvation."*

Child? What child? Jennian priests spoke in riddles attempting to corral a person's thoughts. The mention of a child had to be some tactic to ensure I focus on parenting. *"Are you saying Destiny requires I live the life of a husband now? That I give up my command?"*

Shandul waved a dismissive palm, turning his back to Goro. *"Rescuing Darla is far more interesting."*

So, Shandul knew everything The Cause knows about me.

*"Speak with me again tomorrow. I have so much to grow. And today has so tapped my energy reserves."*

What was woven into those mixed messages?

A child.

Forget my command.

A Jennian priest was tired? Pray tell, what did I need to nurture that had nothing to do with the rest of the universe? After all, Titan was a frozen moon. Better to find a place to think than be standing here after the priest dismissed me. I pivoted and strode away.

By the time I'd found a quiet private room dowsed with soothing green light emitted from a central fire pit vase filled with heat crystals, I was ready to nap. Darla and Shandul ganging up on me could wear me down faster than hand-to-hand combat. At least a little sexual R&R had delayed the worst of the blood lust.

What did tomorrow hold? War? My own private blood war. A battle of wills. And despicable blood fucking. Why had Darla called the blessed event that? And what of the child if Darla cared nothing for the sacred act of sex? Could Darla even carry Xquine seed full term? It was so rare that a were-assassin ever had a live birth. Or was Shandul's attempt to send me off parenting just another tactic to get me to quit my command? To drive me away. Or make me lose even more respect in the eyes of The Council.

Shandul had said we need to learn to let go in marriage. To delegate power? Was Darla even capable of making decisions about a foreign universe?

\* \* \* \*

Goro awoke with a start upon the hard stone floor of the chamber where he fell asleep. What would Darla think of his absence, he wondered. Would she believe anything I said if the

night has passed? So much for Jennian intelligence. What could one expect from beings that burned up like the legendary phoenix, leaving a new Jennian behind every three centuries, earth time?

A warrior had to admit that was the way to go. All predetermined. So little a mess. And out of the flames came a new being. No messy blood or ashes. Just light. I snorted.

Whether the aftermath was strewn with entrails, severed body parts, carcasses, their wives' swollen bellies, or screaming newborns, warriors preferred the evidence of their labors. Any warrior who claimed otherwise lied.

Jennians were truly bizarre. Why listen to one? What was the point of visiting Titan? Oh yes. To contact The Cause. To earn back my command. Enlightenment was not part of the motivation. So we dabbled with illumination? I'm none the worse for the experience. But Darla needed lots of attention. And this compound was the perfect sanctuary to earn back her respect. I got my feet beneath me and headed back to my quarters.

Sweat beaded upon my brow.

The beginnings of blood lust. I strode through the swooshing doorway into my quarters.

She lay in the bed under the blanket wearing the blue silk.

Bless Devros she slept. A man needed time alone to think. Quickly, I pulled off my clothes and crawled in beside her warm curves.

The silk melted against my skin. She snuggled back against me, thrusting her hair into my face like she'd slept against me for years, yearned for my touch during her sleep.

Fire ignited in all my cells.

Always the blood lust. And now I am here with her. We can see to the cure when she awakens.

The scent of floral soap danced in those soft tresses.

For the moment, she slept soundly. So soundly that I snaked an arm around her waist and ran a thumb across the warm flatness of her belly.

I went rock hard.

Gods the madness of mating. Would she care if I took her in her sleep?

She wriggled her bottom into my arousal.

Begging? I slid a hand between her legs, down to a place no other man would ever touch or see.

She barely gasped and spread her legs.

For me? Was she asleep or dreaming? Her eyes were shut. But she seemed to mumble something with her lips. And the creamy white of her neck made my mouth water.

Oh for a bite of bleeding flesh. The metallic salty tang. Surely she craved it too. I trailed the tip of my tongue along the softest skin where her collar bone met the bend of her neck.

A moan escaped her parted lips.

But she didn't awaken. Taking her in her sleep somehow seemed to be one of those situations she could misconstrue. Definitely unwise.

My throbbing manhood kept insisting I push the matter.

I'm better than a few subconscious urges. Stronger than the blood lust and a weak hotheaded Xquine warrior.

Darla deserved better as well. I laid my head behind hers and nestled into her silken hair.

\* \* \*

Darla stirred in absolute warmth, completely rejuvenated. The soft bedding sure beat sleeping inside her pod fighter any day. Or was it the supple iron of Goro's body molded against

my back that made me feel so wonderful? God how it felt so good to lie with him on the one hand... Then again, the silk gown was so incredible. Delicate. Soft. Flowing. Like it wasn't even there but kept me warm. Everything but my shoulders with the spaghetti straps and deep-v neckline. Truly the gown was a treasure. And Goro found it for me.

Spooning and the silk drape of a gown. Both from Goro. The barbarian had a sweet and caring side. Or he was working me. My life had turned into one big bag of confusion. It's like I had shot into a new world in outer space, a world of wonder, horror, lust, and love. The universe seemed ripe for the picking, But I am the object of contention. I am the dress. I'm running for my life from Voldon's bad ass, into the arms of the sexiest male I could find that my father would certainly despise. But why did I end up incapable of trusting my barbarian? Bound for eternity through an act that would make most people back home shudder.

There was no way out of this. Especially after he left me to sit alone, bored, in this strange barren place for an entire day. Starving. Just where was the food replicator? And how does the dress become proactive?

A wave of nausea shook me.

Not the blood lust again.

Goro's arm jerked where it draped my side, protectively, as if he detected her symptoms.

Or was he dreaming?

His feet shifted erratically.

What was he running from?

Goro bolted upright and stared at the wall.

Okay. I studied his profile where he sat in some strange act of vigilance. "Bad dream?" Probably a starvation-induced night terror.

Another wave of nausea twisted my gut.

To eat or not to eat... That's the question.

"No," he said. "I think we should have brought the crystal skull."

I did not hear that. And wasn't I the one with that gem of an idea vetoed by the dictator? "You're dreaming. Lie back. Shut your eyes. You won't remember any of this in the morning."

He just sat there.

Looking awfully worried. Well, it was too late to fret about the skull. "Goro." I snaked my fingers around one of his steely elbows and pulled his back down onto the blanket.

He stared at the ceiling's smooth rocky surface.

What brought on this change of heart? "Goro?"

"I haven't slept much. I should try to sleep." He raked a handful of fingers through his hair.

He looked so vulnerable. So lost. Why? "What did you dream?"

"Sometimes my dreams come true."

"But Shandul said psychics can't see the future." Was this another game?

He rolled onto his side and lovingly slid his palm across the fabric covering my ribcage beneath my breasts. But he never made eye contact with me.

What type of Hell unfolded in his dreams? "Shandul says nobody can see the future, Goro."

His brow knotted.

What bothered Goro this much in a dream? What could have possibly been so bad that the last Xquine warrior can't sleep and wants to go back through a wormhole and do what his mate insisted on doing? Men just don't admit their wives were right. Wouldn't he appear to be

weak or stupid? That's so not Goro. "You're starting to worry me." Maybe the priest did something to him.

"That's not a bad thing." His orange gaze slid to mine. He studied my face. Slowly, ever so slowly, he laid a warm palm against my cheek and rubbed a circle into my skin with the thumb's pad. "But it's my place to worry. You know so little about the universe that I don't want you to get upset when I can deal with whatever Destiny drops onto our path."

He was so caring. But I have a brain. I'm not a gown. "I can think, Goro," I whispered.

A smile stretched his mouth wide. "That's why I chose you."

I'd rather hear the choice was born out of love. But maybe I'm just a stupid flower girl from Earth. It was time to don Crazy Darla's black leather.

He settled down laying his head on his folded arm, running his fingers through my hair and over my forehead.

Such a gentle touch. If only he spoke those words... I love you. Or I've always loved you. Those would really be nice to hear now. "Just tell me about the dream."

"Why?"

"Because it was impressionable enough to push a man to do something his mate couldn't convince him to do."

His same mask that just smiled broke into a chuckling grin.

He was so relaxed. So calm and soft spoken.

His fingers massaged my scalp.

This was almost where we were before *The Seeker* blew. Both of us wanting to touch, dreaming of lying together, afraid that someone would catch us smiling at each other. This moment was a happy place for lovers. But dare I trust this sensation as being loved?

"Shandul said something in private that has me going back over everything. Thinking. Calculating. What if I made a mistake? What if we left some sort of sign that we'd been to Dalna? And what if we lead Voldon right to the cave?"

His indecision was so genuine. But such a sign of weakness. A flaw. He would really hate hearing that. And the only way I'd survive this tour of duty would be to rely on Goro as my Rock of Gibraltar. I laid a palm on his muscled arm.

His gaze turned inquisitive and met mine.

He didn't speak. Nor did he need to. I could just stare into his orange gaze the rest of the day.

"Shandul mentioned think of the child." His whisper was so faint.

Shit. Did that mean I'm pregnant? "Are you implying anything?"

## Chapter Seventeen

Why did the mention of pregnancy suddenly kick me in the ass? Darla slid her gaze to the ceiling in her personal quarters where she stretched out beside her husband's warm body deep beneath the surface of Saturn's moon, Titan. A baby meant their new life hiding out somewhere in the universe to ensure the risky pregnancy made it full term. Goro's baby. Or was this just Goro's ploy to get what he wanted? I need my kick-ass black leather. And Crazy Darla. "What did Shandul mean? He said psychics can't see the future. Right?"

"I didn't know how you were going to take the news. And I have no idea if the priest's point referred to a pregnancy unknown to us. But here we are, contemplating the reality that were-assassins are highly sexual creatures. Especially since we've engaged in numerous sexual encounters." He sighed, grabbed my hand from his warm skin, turned my palm upward, and planted the warmest, softest kiss in my palm.

My belly melted into a puddle.

Blood lust or not. This was the man I fell in love with. Goro with wild hair. A hungry Goro. That damned hunger is going to be my end.

"Darla, Shandul told me my life as a commander has ended. A new phase of my life has begun."

I could have told him that. If my mate thought I was sharing him with a freaking starship full of manipulative people, he was crazy. The last thing I needed was more stress than marriage to The Cause's mastermind. Pregnancy or not.

Pregnancy?

My heart sank to take the place of my liquefied gut.

Do I have any symptoms?

"Darla?"

I'm in the middle of nowhere. I studied Goro's standard stoic gaze.

He was a commander. At least if I bore him this child of legend, he was strong and smart enough to keep the baby alive. Wasn't that the point of life? Marry the toughest guy around so your children would survive to marry too and have more children to carry on the family's genetic legacy?

"Darla?"

"What?"

Something caring danced around his black pupils.

He squeezed my knuckles against his bare drumming chest. "Do you feel any of symptoms of pregnancy that earth women experience?"

I wouldn't know. But would a woman who needed to control a man tell him what he wanted to hear? Or what got her where she wanted to be? Just where do I want to be? Was there any sense in returning to earth? That promise was obviously Goro's ploy to get me back through the wormhole. So what now? "What changes if I think I am pregnant?"

"Everything."

What a simple compound word that reveals so little yet resonates so much. "Like what?"

“We can stay here. This sanctuary is a secret known only to free-thinking operatives. It’s a holy place. A sanctuary for those needing to stop and recuperate. A Jennian haven of love and light. We’re welcome. Yet, something tells me we should leave. Find a warmer place to raise our child. We can hide somewhere on the other side of the universe. Raising a child inside a frozen moon might prove detrimental to the child’s health given the lights go out. We have other options though. We could seek shelter on a starship. Arken would have no qualms taking us aboard to protect the child of legend. There’s the aspect of safety in numbers with Arken. Or we can find a place on a planet where nobody would think to look for us. Tell me what sounds most appealing to you.”

I get to choose?

Goro squeezed my hand again. “What will help you feel most comfortable?”

Oh his comforting actions.

Tears threatened to warm my eyes.

He is letting me choose. I blinked back the tingling heat of wonder combined with shock, before my view of his chiseled chest completely smeared. Maybe everything he said all along was true? “Can I think about it until tomorrow?” Anything to keep from further discussion with rising tears. I inhaled to suck them all back into hiding.

“Yes.”

Oh to marvel in the fact I get to decide.

So many choices...

Where does a woman begin? And he waited, letting me choose. He wasn’t so much the barbarian now. Just a man with all that amazing packaging. My man. Uh, alien. But can I touch the skin that I yearn to caress without feeling a prisoner? I reached out and placed a palm against the warm pliable skin of his breast.

His heart drummed beneath my hand.

It beat for me whether or not he said it was for his extinct planet.

His muscle tensed.

Oh, he was so strong. So alive.

Gods, to fuse us together into one loving mass. Again. This time knowing he meant what he said. Just to pull him deep inside me and keep him there. To feel safe and loved. Yes, loved by Goro. And that’s what our baby needed.

He leaned over, ever so slowly as if he wanted to tease me with the wait, and finally devoured my soft wanting mouth with his.

Desire bolted through my core.

Was all of this the blood lust? I want it to be more. I want us to love each other. Do I get to love this man because I choose to, universe?

\* \* \* \*

Goro struggled not to fill his mate with his seed too quickly after he pulled the slinky gown over her head. But the heartfelt glint in her eyes indicated something had finally clicked for her. And no warrior could fight back the urge to hold and devour his mate in order to show her that he loved her.

“Touch me, Goro,” she begged as he thrust his shaft’s tight head across the doorway to her slick heat.

Her legs bent more, dropping her knees to the mussed bedding at my side like a queen raising her castle’s portcullis to me. Invitingly. But she’d have to be patient, or I’d never get to *touch* her. Showing her what he felt was essential to proving my love though. I planted a kiss



where the blood pounded at the bend in her neck.

She hissed and thrust a handful of fingers into my hair, holding me there, arching those wonderful mounds of her breasts against my chest.

Such magnificent treasures shouldn't be neglected. I slid a palm between her chest and arm, across her back, and held the breasts in place where her back arched, just so I could march my mouth to one taut bead of a nipple. Just to latch onto the nub and nibble until she writhed. That's what I wanted. Her writhing. Begging. Groaning with her hips pleading for attention.

Her body squirmed with delight.

I kissed across her exotic terrain to the other nipple and treated it with equal respect, setting her legs snaking around my waist to squeeze her demands into every inch of my middle.

Impatience could be a virtue. Not to an Xquine warrior. I slid an arm between her thigh and my skin to force her to release her hold. So I could venture lower. To show her what I felt for her.

She groaned a rebuke but dropped her legs back to the bed and clutched at my shoulders with scraping fingernails.

I kissed down the place between her breasts where they anchored to her heart, down to her flat belly, to her navel. Her breaths became so choppy that I had to place both palms against her belly and calm her by petting her.

"Oh, Goro."

Her hips would have bucked wildly if I hadn't pinned them down with my chest where my arms almost rooted into her groin. Right where she seemed an unreal beast with limbs shooting back and projecting forward in some strange concoction of nature where our limbs almost joined. She was more than desire. She was my passion. My every reason for existence. And I wanted to revere her enough to show her what she meant to me. But her moist heat tempted me to taste of my mate, not humor her.

No tasting until I'd devoured her navel. I ran the pad of a thumb around the soft edge of the imprint of her humanity, the place a child connects with its mother, where the truth of humanoid dependence upon others was tattooed upon the individual for all to remember that nobody can dwell alone and live a complete life, that life requires something to fill the void of existence. Something like Darla.

She moaned, rolling her chin back, grabbing at the blanket for comfort.

If only I can fill my heart with her need, I'd never go thirsty. I dipped my tongue into that well of a soul and dug like a man mining for gems.

She wriggled and cried out.

Gripping the bedding. Hopefully, she climaxed. Because I wasn't finished with her, and she deserved to feel adored over and over again. I slid the tip of my tongue across the rim of her navel and down the soft flesh of her lower abdomen, crawling away from the warmth of her body, letting her rise like an Xquine woman ready to take what she wanted from her mate.

Darla shoved up with her arms, arching her breasts high, spreading her knees so wide that she plainly wanted me there touching and tasting her soul's salty essence. The fingers of one of her hands grabbed my hair and shoved my nose right into her sex, against her wet heat where I paid homage to my mate, sucking the altar of her soul.

\* \* \* \*

Darla thought her life would end when Goro's tongue tickled her breath away inside her navel. That was before he *ate* her. Nobody could have warned me how impossible it was to sit and just let a man treat you to the most exquisite form of pleasure. I had to hold onto his hair or

I'd fall off the bed while the stars blurred the darkness behind my eyelids.

Ecstasy's wave hit me like a tsunami. It crashed against me, drawing me underwater, dragging me along so deeply entrenched that I couldn't come up to gasp for air. And all I wanted to do was shout for Goro to help me. But he was there somewhere beneath the silent waves that drowned my words, with me, touching me like I was a goddess.

The wave dumped me on the bed in a gasping heap.

I could feel him rise and carefully place his hands where he wanted to move. Up. Toward me.

The bed jostled more.

But I couldn't open my eyes. Couldn't make my heart settle down.

The warm hint of his presence heralded he lowered down overhead. His soft massaging mouth settled on my neck again. But I couldn't find a spark of energy to move. To utter a sound of defeat so he could feel the champion. All I could do was lie there and let him have his way with me. It didn't seem like a problem for him. He gently cuddled against my body like I was the only food for his soul.

How could this notoriously wild Xquine warrior be so loving? I slid an exhausted humming arm around his shoulder and tried to pull him close to me, so close that our hearts became one. Or just to hang on in case he decided to vanish.

His warm mouth disappeared. His hips thrust his firm shaft deeply inside me in one swift intoxicating motion.

I gazed into those eyes that burned. For me. His stare wouldn't release me. Held me there. Forced me to watch the passion overtake his features while he drove another smothering tidal wave into my being. The water pressure mounted and threatened to suck the life from my soul until I couldn't think about anything but Goro's fiery eyes. And then he roared his deep dark jungle sound, releasing the force of the suffocating water to allow air to flood the space between us and fill my lungs. He sank onto my quivering chest, pumping and pumping into me with his incredibly hard pulsing cock. And all I could do was lie there beneath my barbarian, accepting the joy of defeat.

What else could he use to make our life complete? I held him until he seemed capable of breathing again. But he didn't seem able to pull himself away. His amazing weight blanketed me with protection and outright regard.

I'd grounded a barbarian.

Or he'd grounded himself. There was no way his actions could be misconstrued as anything but love. I slid her palms down his muscular back and back up again, massaging him. My man. My mate. And I finally know he loves me.

\* \* \* \*

Goro could sense Darla's change of attitude in the way her hands petted his body. Like she prayed. She paid my oxygen-starved muscles homage. Her touch was going to lull me to sleep. Not good when I still hadn't spoken with Shandul. But her behavior showed they might have met on common ground. I'd given her choices as well. Any moron studying earth history would know twenty-first-century earthlings held independence sacred. And what had I given her? Commands. Those days were long gone with *The Seeker*.

Given ample time, Titan had revealed more than he expected. And today the priest might divulge yet another secret. At least, one more meeting allows me the opportunity to disclose I found a crystal skull. No more secrets. What would Shandul say?

"I'm hungry." Darla sighed and squeezed me in an embrace. "There wasn't a food

replicator in here yesterday. There's not much of anything really. This place is kind of strange. We get a heater and bed." She scanned the empty room. "For the record, I love this gown."

The temperature crystals still burned, a cool blue now, indicating a night-day cycle. A measurement of time. Devros knew I needed to give her time to feel she was making her own choices.

"I don't want to stay here, Goro. You're right. If anything happens on this moon, our butts are ice cubes. There is no grass or flowers or warm sun to lie beneath. Our child would never find shapes in the clouds. I remember one day when I was very young when I saw the clouds form a castle in the sky." She laughed. "It probably didn't really look like a castle."

Memories so often revealed a person's perspective. What would they say about Darla? She saw possibilities in what was there. Like me, the war, and our future. I shoved up to watch her face in case more memories came to her.

Her gaze wandered as if searching for the clouds in the room's dark recesses. "My friends looked up. They said they saw the castle too. Maybe I'm not crazy." Her smile melted into deep thought. "There aren't any children here, Goro. This isn't where I want to raise my child."

I hadn't thought about a child needing friendship. How odd something so simple would be her first concern. She would make an amazing mother with all she could teach the child. And there should be other teachers. "Aboard a starship, our child will find friends."

Her determined gaze locked on mine. "But Voldon attacks the nurseries. We can't risk the baby there."

How could I not have thought of that yet? So Shandul realized so much more about my life than I had. My past was just testing and winning Darla over. That's suddenly changed. Forget starships. I can no longer risk death in combat or on a starship because Darla and our child of legend need my protection. How could I have missed such a crucial point to hold above all else? Especially after Red Trekaar experienced the same debilitating blow over a year ago. I have been reborn the bridge to free thinking through mating. I'm more than a simple warrior who must see my child to adulthood. My blood is the key to the future. To die means my mate's days are numbered. And so would be my child's.

Or Voldon will beat Destiny.

"You look like you're going to hurl," Darla said.

So she can read me. Did I really look that way? I forced a glare on my face. "And how do I look now?"

"Ferocious." Her arm slid around me, her fingers tickling my lower back.

Too damned low.

I went rock hard.

She chuckled. "Well, it looks like your blood-lust nausea has come full circle. But I, however, just seem to be hungry."

From blood lust or pregnancy? Time would tell.

"Goro." Her hot breath on my breast sent shivers down my spine.

My body screamed *ravage her*.

Again. What if she carried his child? Inter-species pregnancies were so risky. Nobody need do anything to cause a miscarriage. And here he was planning to mount her. Again. "We must take care now that you might be with child. Perhaps we should adopt a celibate path?"

She smirked. "Please don't torture me. Don't you love me?"

How could she speak those words? I stared into the dark pools of her eyes framed by her

halo of loose brown hair.

Was that curiosity or inquisition? “Darla. I never should have brought you to The Cause without creating our blood bond. For that I apologize. Your life was on the line for little more than my promises of love. I left your soul raw and yearning for what I had neglected to provide, my love. I should have done more for you up front. But I failed you in seeking vengeance for the Xquine race.”

Her mask softened.

Did that mean she grasped reality?

She cleared her throat. “I love you too. And I think I forgive you.”

\* \* \* \*

Goro stood before the Jennian priest’s muted glow in his garden, wondering what would come from this meeting.

“*Have you pondered my words?*” Shandul asked in mindspeak.

More than he could ever know. “Yes.” I nodded. “*I came to bid you love and light.*”

“*You are departing?*”

“Yes.”

“*What plans do you have?*”

Telling Shandul anything left an opportunity for Voldon to find Darla. “*We will seek out a safe place to live as Destiny wishes.*”

Shandul nodded, walking toward Goro, his long straight robe nary moving with his floating movement, his cold calculating omniscient gaze boring a hole through Goro. “*And what will you name your daughter?*”

Daughter? This was a trick to see if Darla showed sign of gestation. “*A girl? How do you know?*” Countering with a question should distract the priest.

“*I’ve heard more than the common legends. Your daughter is to wed Red Trekaar’s son and unite the universe.*”

What? The priest toyed with me. “*How is it that you’re privy to that information?*”

“*I am the last of my line.*”

A Jennian priest who would not recycle? Shandul *could* see the future. Destiny must have led me here to hear Shandul’s words.

Shandul stopped a step away. “*I suppose the stars took pity upon me and showed me what others could not see. It is a stark revelation because in seeing your daughter I learned of my death.*” A train of thought consumed his mask. “*I too face my own unforeseen change. But if my purpose has been to pass on Destiny’s plan to you, I pray I’ve served my life well.*”

What could a man say to that? “*I’m certain you have. You deserve the luxury of being at peace in your afterlife. Love and light.*” Goro nodded.

Shandul’s eyes shut as he reciprocated nod. Then he locked another jolting stare on Goro. “*I knew you wouldn’t fight the transition as Red Trekaar did. Thank your Xquine mental training. Depart for earth now. Voldon searches for the thirteenth crystal skull in a last-ditch effort to alter Destiny’s plan. You must be his distraction.*”

So I must distract Voldon from the skull on Dalna? What else did Shandul hide about the last skull? Darla wasn’t going to be happy after being told she could decide where we’d raise the baby. She wanted nothing to do with starships. Yet an enlightened Jennian priest has seen the future. Answers and honor lay in staying true to Destiny.

## Chapter Eighteen

Against his mate's wishes, Goro risked everything by taking her to *The Meditator* and facing the gray-headed Arken alone inside the commander's dark map chamber just to give him the respect he was due. Although Arken wore the white garb of the crew—a choice for comfort given the man obviously had defended himself out in space enough to land a senior position over The Cause's fleet as well as the purple robe of a Council member—he didn't demand any less respect in his simple attire.

Arken pushed into Goro's mind. *"Why have you returned, Goro?"*

To regain my honor was the lie that avoided mentioning a Jennian priest knew the future. And Darla expected me to fulfill my promise. She'd be happier hearing my reply instead of fuming alone in our personal quarters. *"I have no desire to command again."*

Arken's aged mask pinched with wonder. *"This is unlike the warrior charging battle sword high into every battle breaking out near earth's waters. What makes you turn from driving back darkness?"*

*"A greater battle demands my attention."*

*"I have yet to hear of this one. Pray tell me of its location."*

Did Arken toy with me for answers he already knew like Shandul? *"It lies deeply buried in the hearts and minds of those who dwell in my personal quarters."* I bowed slightly to imply I wished to explain no more about my marital affairs.

*"Marriage can be the most trying endeavor,"* Arken chuckled and stepped through the soft blue bands of light among his projected astral charts.

A Jennian priest and a commander relaying the same message? How could I have been oblivious to that reality all along? War definitely ranked a distraction.

*"I will send you to The Undertaker. Commander Bruden has agreed to offer you sanctuary and provide your wife with all she needs while you assist with his requests."*

As if I ever needed a favor. *"Agreed to offer? You say that as if I'm no longer welcome in the fleet."* Could the point be any more insulting?

*"I feel your choices were due in part to Destiny's promise of a child. So you remained true to Destiny's calling and protected your mate. For that, I commend you. Others still question Darla's loyalties."*

Those questions were a reflection of fear.

*"But bringing your mate aboard a starship risks the life of the child of legend,"* Arken continued. *"The Undertaker avoids most battles in guarding earth. From The Undertaker, your job is to ensure there are no Bramyllion skulls on earth. The Undertaker will safeguard your mate while you are away. If you tire of this duty, return to me for another."*

So I am Arken's responsibility now. I've lost respect of all who fight for The Cause. All but Arken. Maybe his little errand might win back some of my honor. But Destiny wasn't my peers or a starship. Nor was she my mate. Darla wasn't going to care for Arken's orders.

\* \* \* \*

"Why do I have to stay on this tin can while you go dashing off on a mission? Something smells fishy to me, Goro. And I don't care for the way I'm treated aboard your Good Ship

Lollipop.” His mate glowered with her hands on her hips, adopting the universal angry mate stance inside their personal quarters on *The Undertaker*.

There was no avoiding her confrontation, Goro thought. But now wasn’t the time for making skin to skin contact and procrastinating through lovemaking to lessen her unhappiness. And only a fool would declare he was off to save the universe by finding the crystal skulls before Voldon did. Especially when one skull was tucked away in Quadrant 3. She might yell somewhere *public* about how they left the only skull that made a difference on Dalna. Every treasure hunter in the universe would jump space to claim it first. Skirting the issue was best. “I don’t want you captured or injured. I can take the blood syringes and handle this on my own. Besides, no one bothers you. You hide out in this room all day.”

Maybe that was the problem. At least on *The Seeker* she had a huge forested recreational chamber to stretch her legs. These minimalist personal quarters only pleased a meditating psychic.

“You would hide all day too if they weren’t all lurking, staring from afar. Watching that earth nut. You should understand. They’re terrified of me. Don’t you recall asking me to act like a crazy bitch back on your ship?”

If that point was supposed to set me off, she would have to try harder. “They have better things to do like fight a war for freedom of thought than stand around observing an earth specimen, heart of my heart.”

Her lips curled down. “I am not a specimen. And I’d like to know what they’re sending you to do. Are you going to be safe? Were-assassins aren’t sent on vacation. You can get killed. And where would that leave me? Stuck in space on a tin can full of people who’d rather see my lifeless body jettisoned into deep space. If they don’t kill me, I’ll just be alone.” Her voice trailed off to nothing like she was already living in isolation.

To press my mouth over hers and suck out all her tension.

To breathe peace into every cell of her body.

Now was not the time for touching. Darla was strategically toying with me. Trying to get her way. “I’m every bit capable of returning.” Or she would implode any moment, the pregnant female. Highly volatile in her condition with extremely vacillating emotional outbursts. A sign any man awaiting a child would love to witness. Unfortunately, now is not the time for this display. At least she isn’t dowsing the room with tears. The only way to depart without setting off the deluge was to make a sweet pact. He grabbed both of her dangerously soft cheeks between his palms and waited for her gaze to lock on his.

She was paying attention. “You’re just deep under the spell of motherhood, heart of my heart, light of the darkness. You must try to relax. Try to take care of the child for you are everything it has now.” Dare I tell her it’s a girl? That might set off another emotional episode. “And I will not fail you.”

Her furrowed brow softened a bit.

Bless the never-ending universe those words broke through to the sensible Darla hidden beneath the cloak of pregnancy hormones. “I promise to do whatever you like upon my return, Darla. We’ll walk around. I’ll beat the stars out of someone who looks the wrong way at you if that will help.” Maybe that lie was too extreme. “Just please make certain you’re the same loveable you when I return. The you I chose for your wit and charm.” I grabbed her shoulders, planted a kiss on her forehead, and darted for the door of our personal quarters.

She stood there in the center of their personal quarters, stunned by the shock consuming her features.

Maybe the trick with her was to talk about what I loved about her. Be more open. By Devros, if I was lucky, she wouldn't have memorized the corridor layout aboard *The Undertaker*. Yet.

The door swooshed shut behind me.

Her footsteps thundered at my heels.

Or so I thought the door had shut her inside our personal quarters.

"You are not abandoning me on a ship named for burying bodies. I am not here to swab, poke, wrap, or swing the hammer at nails in some morose ritual involving death. It's like I've got to dig your grave or something. Do you hear me?"

Every crew member aboard had to hear that on a psychic starship rarely echoing with little more than absolute silence. And what a translation of a ship's title meaning merely taking on an enormous task. I stretched my stride to the limit. To endeavor to outpace her.

She hopped into a tapping trot, a thunderous cacophony of wild footfalls, until a glare no man wanted to face on his mate, her glower, blocked my path. "Have you been listening to me?"

Was there any way around listening? "Who could have missed a thing you said?"

"Well then if you leave me here, don't expect me to be here when you return."

An ultimatum. How wonderful it is to be with a woman who doesn't cower beneath an Xquine stare. "Are you saying I should have you detained until I return?"

Her eyes pinched with malice. "You're cruel," she snarled and brushed past him with a stiff shoulder, heading back the way she had come.

Cruel or not, it's all about survival. A warrior has to make certain things are safe back home while he's out ridding the universe of pestilence. I'll be back soon. I watched her straightened spine disappear into our personal quarters.

Would telling her I loved her make a difference? Comfort her. I'd been draining myself of blood for days to support her through part of what lay ahead of her for motherhood. Just in case I failed. Yet blood bags weren't exactly warm breathing beings she could cozy up to. And Darla wasn't in the mood for pondering the intelligence of a blood bag. I pivoted back to the docking bay.

A little mission was just what a warrior needed to clear his thoughts as good as any lengthy meditation with a war sword dangling above one's head. I stretched my stride.

\* \* \* \*

Darla sat cross-legged, staring through her portal at deep space's twinkling expanse. This was her future, she mused, rather attempted to. Sitting. Waiting. Wondering if her only barbarian would ever return while she tried not to lose the baby. And damn it if he didn't even tell me he loved me when blasting off to save the day. That was the clincher back home with men. And he'd studied earth culture as much as any free thinker who would eventually mate with an earthling. So what was his problem in his really bad departure? He either didn't really love me... Okay maybe he said something along that line with the heart of my heart thing. But he knows what's said back on earth in my culture. He could have gone the distance and just said *it*. Or he didn't care if I feared he didn't love me. "I am afraid, universe. That's it. This is just fear. It's true."

That wasn't difficult to say. "I'm afraid of being alone."

Truer still. But nobody was listening.

Because I'm not even psychic enough to mindspeak. I'm not much of anything. And what will the baby look like? Me with fiery orange eyes? If so, I won't ever be able to take my child to Earth. The past no longer exists for me as if Earth has been obliterated by the last

Xquine warrior. You'd think he would be sympathetic to my heritage given he's lost almost all of his, thanks to Voldon. But I'm married to an extraterrestrial. What could I possibly have expected? I'm in space now. And when this child comes and I'm all alone, I'm not going to be able to return to Earth.

And then there's the part about being stuck in a foreign freaking place. Nobody will have anything to do with me because Crazy Darla's reputation precedes me. Just how can I function with a child without Goro? It's not like Voldon building his Frankenstein baby. This is my child. Goro's child. But what do I do if Goro is killed running off on these maneuvers?

Emotion welled up from deep inside her and threatened to dribble from her eyes.

Why did my being with Goro always get me so damned emotional? I'd rather be with him. Facing the future. Knowing I'm not alone. Just being happy. And safe with him. Alone sucked. I don't want to be alone.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Goro flew over the Yucatan's forested karst topography pitted with glinting pools and lakes that teased they harbored a Bramyllion skull, he doubted one extraterrestrial crystal was anywhere to be found. Treasure hunters had combed these continents centuries upon centuries. But I had been sent. Orders were orders. "Computer, scan for Bramyllion."

The mineral deposits could still be there though. However, earthlings couldn't detect the slight variation between quartz and Bramyllion to differentiate between the two minerals. But the fascination earthlings had with the glowing crystals proved as strong as that of any species in the universe. All easily overpowered and controlled by the strange rocks of unknown origin.

"I only detect Angstrom and Wrex from a Crellon bounty ship."

Scum out to traffic earthlings. No matter the efforts The Cause went to in order to protect the planet, extraterrestrials came and conquered. Enslaved. The question then revolved around how long ago the spacecraft crashed. "Calculate how long the wreckage has been here."

"At least forty years. I detect no remnant signature extraterrestrial radiation. Or the power crystals were scavenged."

The power crystals could have easily been dragged off for posterity. Any local would find them fascinating. The color was a unique green these earthlings found extremely pleasing. Especially the jungle peoples of the Americas. But where would Voldon search for the skulls if they weren't in the jungle? "What's the name of that island where that Mayanist thinks he can witness the end of time?"

"Apocalypse Island."

"Go to Apocalypse Island. En route, continue scanning for Bramyllion."

The pod shot west so quickly that the small rocky island simply materialized out of the blue Pacific Ocean.

One rock with surf yapping at its heels. Or so the island appeared in its craggy form of broken layered stone.

"I detect four pod fighters."

Must be nice having extra time to throw some sort of were-assassin reunion. Or The Cause decided the time was right to send reinforcements. Like I need assistance. "Land."

The pod lowered like a lift.

Sunlight bore into fighter's warm dark recesses.

Well, the foursome might be able to help with the search. And I can return to Darla. Devros knows she's panicked or pissed. A distressed mate equaled miscarriage. With the elevated risk of the baby being rejected by Darla's body, only a fool would take his time on



errand. I grabbed for sunshine and pulled myself upward.

“That’s—” a familiar female voice started.

Red Trekaar. I blinked, trying to acclimate my vision.

The endless stretch of blue ocean and paler sky framed four people.

Five if you counted the baby Red held. The other child of legend expected to be born of a Nulvitian mated to a lesser-evolved psychic, Jake Straightarrow. Both Red and Jake’s long black hair marked them as the duo.

“Goro?” Red asked.

The shock in her voice was so out of character for her. She had been my star protégé who burned brighter than sacred Devros. If only my child could breathe sunlight into a world of darkness the way Red did. But that was before I took the wrong step. Before I shed bad blood between us and lost her trust.

Red turned and walked across the rock’s grassy coat.

Jake Straightarrow planted his hands on his hips in a casual manner. The wind whipped his long black hair around his black leather like a torn spider web. “Goro, you look like Hell.”

Only because there was never enough time to sleep. To relax. To just be. But what type of life would that be for a warrior? Stagnation. “Jake.” I nodded, swung my boots to the solid ground, and faced the trio.

“Come to think of it,” Jake chuckled, “you look like me. Where in the universe did you find all that hair?”

“Hair grows quickly on Xquine males.” I strode toward the trio.

The faintly glowing Illusian, Strako, and his earthling mate, Rosa were also good to see. Two absolutely competent mercenaries. How Strako hid his glowing aura that could be misconstrued as wings by many earth cultures would be an interesting tale to hear. Not as intriguing a story as how a commander was stripped of his rank. But I’ve already heard that too many times. These mercenaries would definitely sit on the edges of their seats waiting for that unfolding delight. “I see Destiny has treated you all well. Congratulations on the birth of your child.”

“First time’s the charm.” Jake winked. “What about you?”

So Jake led the pack, speaking for all. Or took over when Red couldn’t. “Destiny has kept me busy.”

They must be craving news from The Cause. None of them could have known about off-world happenings. Especially since no one aboard *The Undertaker* had mentioned these four were on Earth. If this party were hiding out from the Blood Wars, they’d done so for over a year.

“Good to see you, commander,” Rosa nodded at me. “I’ll go help with the baby.” She was gone like a breath of wind.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?” Jake smiled.

What would they think the minute they learned the truth? “I lost my command? Very few people know I’m here.”

Jake and Strako shot questioning glances between each other.

“You lost your command?” Jake almost couldn’t choke the words out.

Maybe they’d assist in the hunt for skulls. “I’m searching for Bramyllion skulls for Arken.”

“You buy into too many legends. Give him a beer.” Jake turned and followed in the wake of the females.

Strako waved me along the same path. "Ignore them. They may be somewhat bitter, but we all still fight on the same side."

The gravelly path turned into a small encampment but twenty steps around the corner where it meandered toward two brown tents. The temporary lodges sheltered the sitting area of which encircled a fire pit fashioned from some metallic tub they'd found on the planet. But the fire's warmth couldn't counter Red's cutting stare.

Jake tried to stand between us.

Block his mate's glare with his body. To no avail. She wasn't going to forgive me for using her to do away with Voldon's spies. Maybe things had gotten out of control in her eyes. Or she couldn't reason based on her raging pregnancy hormones back aboard *The Seeker*. But Red's mate was safely standing at her side. And I had no intention of ever harming either one of them because she was the closest thing to a child I'd had before I mated. Red had to know how I felt.

"I can't hear what's going on inside your heads. So, no mindspeaking. I want to know what's been said, or the universe will never rest easy," Jake warned.

"I never rest easy. Why should the universe?" Red muttered.

"Wait inside the tent," Jake finally told Red, ushering her elbow toward the dirt-brown flap. "Why don't you put the child to sleep? You both could use a nap."

Rosa shot Jake a pursed-lipped smirk. "Hey, she's got reason to be on alert."

"And he's lost his command. We should listen for more news," Jake waved at the fire pit. "Please sit. We don't have much in the way of luxuries here," Jake lowered into a squat. "But we do welcome a new face with news."

"Since when?" Rosa snorted and disappeared into the tent with Red.

"Women," Jake laughed.

Strako descended around the fire pit.

Settling down might lead to insight and information. But Voldon didn't need to know where Red Trekaar's baby was. The fact I know means I can be tapped for information. My essence could give away her location. And her child's. Red was right about concealing the child's features. Voldon couldn't identify the boy if he had no idea what he looked like. I lowered into a warrior's crouch. "You must relocate once I depart. No one can know of your location."

Jake and Strako shot all-knowing glances between each other.

"I see you agree." For what truth is worth. "But Voldon is determined to find those skulls. He had a bounty out on Darla. She was captured. I had to chase her across the universe. In doing so, I lost my command."

Strako started to speak.

Goro threw up a palm. "Say nothing. It was bound to happen. The moment I mated with Darla I lost the life I had. I am what sits before you, merely the last Xquine warrior flying on the fumes of my last blood libation with an angry mate left back aboard Arken's starship."

Jake pointed back beyond Goro's shoulder. "There's a pod fighter de-cloaking behind you."

"What?" Red groaned from the tent.

The flap snapped open. Rosa rushed out with Red carrying the baby.

Red slid to a halt beside my boots. "Who else did you bring, Goro? Like I can afford everyone knowing where I am!"

They obviously weren't going to buy into I came alone.

## Chapter Nineteen

Like I can't handle a little trip to my hometown, Darla fumed and yanked herself up into the whipping ocean breeze and scanned the rocky island for any sign of her husband. If he thought he was leaving me alone on that ship with all those gaping aliens, he was wrong. To think I'd be endangered on my home turf. He's crazier than his buddies think I am. Especially since those cold syringes offered anything but bare bones comfort. Why couldn't he see I have feelings?

Warm tears blurred my sunlit view.

I am not going to cry anymore. God I hate crying. Marriage has reduced me to a sniffling sob. Or those damned computers are right. I am pregnant. Well, that won't be holding me back. Crazy Darla has landed to take what she wants. My husband. I spotted two tents.

People rose before the flapping brown shelters, looking my direction. All wore black leather. Mercenaries. And, bingo, there was my husband. Goro led the crowd toward me with a hungry clip in his stride.

Probably not to satiate his blood lust by that scowl on his lips. I tried not to laugh. But laughing was such a nice change to sobbing.

One woman carried a bundle. Her black hair flared red.

Red Trekaar. Red because her hair flared red when she was pissed. Red probably thought I was bad news. By the looks of her bundle, she toted her own child of legend. At least, Goro's story about Red Trekaar and the legend held true. Maybe I should respect him a little more. Maybe I'll start tomorrow when he holds true on his promises. I shoved my boots toward the ground and jumped onto the hard rocky surface.

"Darla, what are you doing here?" Goro demanded in his deep commanding half whisper.

I threw back my shoulders. "I told you I wasn't staying on that ship. So I decided I'd better follow you when I left it."

Goro halted inches away, snaking his arms across his chest. The others stopped behind him.

Apparently, leery of my past behavior. "Did you tell them I'm not crazy?"

Goro's mouth went straight as a line. "We're not going to discuss anything. You're going back to *The Undertaker*."

Because he was ashamed of me? Or feared what the masses would do because of how I behaved all those years? "Why aren't Rosa and Straightarrow jetting their asses up to party with the carcasses?" I threw up a palm. "No. Let me tell you. Because *The Undertaker* sucks. Because Rosa and Straightarrow took on mates who want to be with them. Who set out on missions in teams. And why do I have to sit around waiting for you to return on a ship where the crew prepares for burial?"

Goro grabbed my arms above the elbows and held me still, his orange eyes sparking with fireworks. "Stop this. You're just pregnant. You can't control your emotions."

"Pregnant?" Red gasped. "Now I know you lost your mind, Goro. You've gone beyond mating with Crazy Darla. You're *procreating*."

Goro's grip slid away. He turned, facing the huddling psychic mercenaries, and stood

ramrod straight. "Darla pretended to be crazy for me. If you think I used you, why wouldn't I have had her feign insanity to manipulate everyone else?"

Sweet universe. He's standing up for me.

My heart melted into a big pool of tears.

\* \* \* \*

"Please stop lamenting, Darla." Goro tried to squeeze the breath out of his mate's lungs in an enormous hug to snuff the dirge, but the woman just kept weeping. If only I could backtrack to Titan and wait out these tides of hormonal attacks. To keep her company and lessen her fears. Provide support. She seemed fine when we were together. Most of the time.

"Try this." Strako produced a brown bottle.

"Beer sucks," Darla expelled. "I need rum. Pineapple rum," she blubbered.

"If it would ease your pain, I'll depart to find you some," the huge Illusian announced.

"No." I met the man's blue gaze. "Think of the baby."

Rosa smacked her mate's shoulder. "Yes, think of the baby. She needs wine, my love."

Strako's face froze. He inhaled long and loudly as if he awaited the confusion he experienced with pregnancy issues to disappear.

Marriage seemed to do that to a man. Now to calm down Darla. "Can she lie down?"

"Is she a threat to my baby?" Red shouted where she clutched her child to her shoulder. Her hair had bled back to black.

A sign by the grace of Destiny that she would allow us a moment to gather Darla's wits. I squeezed Darla's damp nose into the crook of my neck. "Of course not. To her baby or yours. She's not taking well to the pregnancy. Blessed Devros, it seems determined to stick with her."

"Have her sit by the fire pit. I'll boil water for tea," Rosa ordered.

Anything to reduce the island ambiance back to simple blustery gusts. And nature proved soothing more oft than not. I ushered Darla's compliant form to the hearth and forced her shoulders down until she sat.

She just sniffed now.

Rosa handed Darla a small piece of cloth. "We don't have a lot of luxuries here. But you can dry your face." Rosa produced a smile.

Duty had become a joke. I was forced to leave my frustrated mate aboard a ship where she felt alienated just so I could pretend to search for Bramyllion skulls. And duty dumped me at the mercy of Red Trekaar. Red had vowed to have nothing to do with me again. But our two children are destined to change the universe. Destiny obviously wanted me to rethink my priorities in duty.

Something about this chance encounter rang with facing one's fear. Just whose fear was being confrontational today though? I surveyed the group and snaked an arm around my mate's stiff shoulders.

Rosa squatted beside Darla and became quite attentive. "I have some wine, Darla. It's red. But they say a glass of wine a day is healthy for the mother and baby during pregnancy."

Darla nodded.

"I'll be right back." Rosa patted Darla's shoulder and shot me a supportive glance.

When will I ever know what my mate needs? "So, a lifetime spent studying earth traditions boils down to one final encounter and the ultimate revelation."

Strako and Straightarrow sat down on their haunches and grinned, beyond bright-eyed.

"What would that be," Straightarrow asked.

Simple. "I know nothing about earthlings."

Jake burst out laughing.

How insulting.

Jake leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and gathered a serious composure. "Don't feel alone. There's not one man on earth who would claim to understand earth women. It's the way of the universe." He appeared to choke back his laughter. But guffawed just the same.

"Can you be any more insulting?" Darla blurted and blew her nose in the rag.

"You're right." Jake tried to sit still. "I shouldn't laugh. We've all been there. This will all pass when the baby comes. And then everyone will have to deal with the mental fatigue and general lack of sanity for the following years with thousands of those loaded bombs called diapers here on earth. Or so I've been warned."

Red stuck her head out the tent flap. "I thought you were tough enough to deal with a diaper or two."

Jake shot her a grin. "Anyone who would marry you would have to be."

She rolled her eyes and shot me a warning glance before disappearing behind the tent flap.

Jake waved off the diaper discussion. "What about you, Strako? Still wishing the great mystery of love would demystify the inner workings of the female mind?"

Strako peered sideways, left then right, only to nod slightly in reply.

"Why are you here?" Jake's tone suddenly grew serious.

Maybe I should just admit everything. But where would that leave me? Probably wishing I kept all a secret. "I'm searching for Bramyllion skulls."

"You and every crotch-rot Crellon." Jake wagged his head. "Are you telling us Arken sent you out here to search for something that is obviously not here after three thousand years of extraterrestrial treasure hunts?"

Would nodding be a waste of energy? "Yes."

Strako waved his helpful Rosa over. "I've scanned the tropics countless times in my boredom. Destiny doesn't seem to wish to reveal the location of those antiquities."

Thank the stars.

Rosa handed a brown plastic cup to Darla.

"Thank you." Darla tilted the cup high and gulped.

As if she wished to lose herself in a spirited slumber. "Slowly." I tried to lower the base of the glass a bit. "Think of the poor child."

Darla struggled against my hold, managing to gulp down the last drop and wiped her lips with the back of a hand. "Gods, I haven't had a good drink in ages."

She probably choked down putrid water on the Crellon ship. Maybe I was too hard on her. She'd suffered so much because of me. Caring for her emotional crises of pregnancy would be a small price to pay in the long run. I owed her. And what was wrong with a man caring for his mate? It's not like I have a planet full of relatives to help with the pregnancy, childbirth, or rearing of the infant.

Darla's tense body slackened a bit beneath my arm.

Wine didn't waste time.

She hiccupped.

"Just give up the search, Goro. The only skulls you'll find here are frauds," Jake said.

"Yes, come back with me, or find some other place for me to wait out this pregnancy."

Darla squirmed again. "*The Undertaker* doesn't feel like home. And you promised."

Yes, I did.

Rosa disappeared into Red's tent.

Just what were the females doing beneath the concealing tarps? I hadn't seen the baby up close. Or heard the child cry. Children cried. Gods more than pregnant women. Thank the universe. "So how old is your son?"

Jake's eyes pinched with suspicion. "How do you know I've had a son?"

Hadn't the universe heard? "I've been disconnected from the chatter of communications and mindspeak for months."

Strako and Jake didn't look like they believed the explanation.

Well, they required the full explanation. "Darla was captured by Crellon bounty hunters. I had to find her. When I returned, there wasn't any gossip of your child's birth aboard *The Undertaker*."

"Then where did you hear about the child's sex?" Jake demanded.

The tone has gone terribly foul here. "From the Jennian priest on Titan."

Strako shifted attentively. "I know Shandul. He nears the end of his cycle. If what you say is true, he sees the future." The Illusian crossed his forehead in his culture's traditional triangular path of prayer. "His wisdom will be greatly missed."

Jake's gaze never stopped piercing through Goro. "What else did this priest tell you?"

Would it make a difference to share the knowledge? But Destiny called. And to pass on any information to affect the future would ease the journeys of both families. "Darla carries a girl. You know the rest."

"Jake." Red called from inside the tent. "None of us dare trust him. He's probably here to collect our child's blood. I don't want them here."

The menacing Native-American ex-mercenary from earth gathered his boots beneath him and rose with the determination of a were-mate etched on his face. "I hate to be a bad host. But I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

## Chapter Twenty

What could a man do when his mate had trouble focusing? Goro waited for Arken to indicate how much damage Darla had done.

The serious Arken nodded where he stood among the glowing blue grid and stars in his dark star chamber room. *"Goro, you are fortunate your mate did not follow you into battle,"* the wizened elderly man said in mindspeak.

More than he could ever imagine. *"Yes. She has promised not to chase after me again."* To listen. To focus on keeping the baby safe so I can protect her in my own way.

*"And you take her vows as truth now?"* Arken's questioning gaze demanded a reply.

Finally. *"We have come to an understanding."*

*"But she refuses to remain on The Undertaker."* Arken sighed. *"We bring these things upon ourselves, Goro."* He paced in and out of the darkness and blue lighting.

Am I to hear that logic at every turn?

Arken's commanding gaze locked on mine through the murky blackness of the room. *"Take your mate and seek a safe haven for your child on a remote inconspicuous planet where you feel comfortable. Welcome the child of legend. There are simply too many dangers aboard a starship. Even if they may only seem to lurk inside your mate's thoughts."*

Decommissioned first and now excommunicated by The Cause? *"So I am useless to serve? I've lost all respect for my service and must leave The Cause?"*

A smile softened the commander's stoic mask. *"You report to Destiny. My job is merely to remind you of that duty."* Arken began pacing left again. *"I think you've always known this. Why you cannot see it now remains the question to answer."*

\* \* \* \*

Goro had pondered how fitting his mate into the grander scheme of war during her pregnancy just wasn't going to be easy with every one of his drumming footfalls leading him back to the silver door of his private quarters. Arken revealed all with the greatest clarity. Darla should be happy now. We were leaving. And Arken seemed to respect me. Combine that with Destiny's plan and I'm leaving with my honor intact. In our mating, we chose to carry out Destiny's plan. But Darla seemed so soft these days. So fragile. I'm going to be more careful. More attentive. I stepped past the sliding door leading into my personal quarters.

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you." Her honest gaze begged for forgiveness where those eyes locked upon me. She stood in the gently draping pale blue silk gown.

My gift.

Was she waiting for me? For something? I crossed the space to stand before her.

Beauty. That's what she was. The most heavenly body any man could stand before the way the gown clung to her breasts. The way her loose brown hair framed her glorious body down to her hips. A goddess.

My goddess in her gown of purest water reflecting the cloudy mist, with her hair the color of the most fertile earth. All promised the greenest life would spring forth from her. My child. The child of legend. Was she even she real? If I dared touch her, would she vanish like a swirling vapor? Like Xquine. My gaze slid to hers. "You're beautiful."

A smile took hold of her features and yanked away the questions her face held. "Black never was my favorite color. But it can sure help a girl when she's acting like a crazy witch. I'd choose this dress over leather any day."

All for the greater good of free thinkers and Destiny. Arken was right. Truth has been there all along. I never worked for anyone other than Destiny. And I should have realized Darla and I no longer belonged here.

"So, you don't want to tell me that we're staying here? I mean. It's all right. I'm with you. Whatever you must do. I know I can trust you."

The declaration of love could fuel and win battles. But her last four words were more important than hearing her proclaim her love. I snatched the curvaceous goddess into my arms and studied the flurry of thoughts dancing in her dark eyes.

What phantoms seduced him therein? Not phantoms. The future.

The future no longer revolved around grasping at what I was. I had to face those phantoms. Face my fears. Face the fear of losing what I was. Welcome the unknown. And in those dark eyes lay my Destiny.

"What are you thinking, Goro?"

Too many things to risk speaking and overwhelming her. "I couldn't have made a wiser choice in mates."

Her warm palms settled against the muscles in my upper arms. She seemed to withdraw but her mischievous lowering of her chin only made her appear to shrink away. She stared up at me through her dark lashes. "I thought you might regret that after I ruined your hunt for the skulls."

"You merely interjected the truth of the matter. You are more important than whatever The Cause decides to order me to do. And those orders were nothing but a farce. We know where the last skull is. My life among free thinkers has turned into a farce." Now, my life is Darla. I crushed my lips over hers and thrust my tongue inside her warm hungry mouth.

An alarm blared.

Not an attack. They had to get off *The Meditator*. I broke free of her lips and stared into her wide eyes. "Get your pants on, Darla."

With my assistance in dressing, they ran through the chaotic corridors within minutes. Darla had a death grip on the gown.

They had to reach the docking bay. Only one thing could keep her alive. Her pod fighter the universe so generously provided. That singular piece of exotic armor would ensure she survived. Hopefully, the baby was on the way. If anything happens to me, I've done my part to shift the powers of the universe.

*The Meditator* vibrated with such violent force they both fell against the hard trembling wall.

Pain shot from my elbow to my shoulder.

An enormous impact. Or explosion. The ship could blow. They had to reach the docking bay. I grabbed my waist and shoved her back toward the lift.

"I'm with you," she shouted as we jumped over scrambling crew members.

The lift wouldn't open.

Gods' jest. Voldon was a bastard. This was not the time to remove Destiny from the equation. "Back. Go back to a room."

Not more than an earth hour later, Goro hid with his mate, biding his time, waiting as the crew members were rounded up, one by one, and dragged from the corridor by Voldon's



zombified army, through a hole blasted in the wall. All I could do was hide until an opportunity to reach the docking bay arose. Basic functions in the ship had ceased other than life support. Apparently, the navigators and controllers were enslaved already. All I could do was duck into an open door and force Darla to change her clothing. If she didn't look like a were-assassin, she might not be exterminated on sight.

"Are they coming in our direction yet?" she whispered, yanking the blue gown's hem down around her body.

Something tells me she doesn't want to hear yes. But the screaming and the shouting kept creeping closer and closer. I watched the soldiers' distorted red reflections in the door opposite the room where they hid.

The smears dragged a woman out of her quarters.

"Can you hide somewhere? I can go with them. You can follow," she whispered.

She'd lost her mind. I peered into her incredibly serious gaze. "You're insane. I'm not leaving you."

"Voldon wants me most. Nothing will happen to me."

She spoke truth. But how can I let her go? They had come to enslave the survivors. Not my mate and child.

"Let me save us for now. Crazy Darla's one Hell of a bitch. They'll fry your ass to ashes if you don't. Who'll save me then? I've got one full syringe. And you?"

Footsteps stormed toward them.

Damn, what else could we do?

"In the shower." She shoved me toward the lavatory.

Her plan was the only chance we had in facing Voldon's troops and their incendiary torches that would turn organic material into ash with one flash. And we both are armed with syringes. She could work her way through the madness pretending to be someone else. "Do not fight them. Just play along." I slammed a kiss on her lips and hid in the shower.

Somehow, I'd follow her.

Unless the soldiers torched everything.

Hopefully, my seed germinated and legends wouldn't die.

\* \* \* \*

Essentially weaponless when facing a torch, Darla slammed her bare shoulder blades up against the cold hard wall, acting as if she were the only person in the cabin, hiding right beyond the door. No projectiles, she had promised. Goro said play along. I'm just going along with the game. Just playing the part. Would my outfit fool them all? Why did I suddenly feel dead? Because this wasn't a game in a controlled environment back on *The Seeker*. And *The Mediator* was just as dead. Being harvested of its parts, its very soul, by an insane humanoid.

Footsteps thundered toward me.

I can do this. Weapon's or not, someone's got to save Goro. And I can hurl projectiles with the best of them. I've just got to wait for the right moment.

My heart pounded harder than it ever had in my life.

A body slid across the threshold, dressed in plain red jacket and pants. The man's black boots gleamed beneath the muted overhead lighting as if teasing they didn't have one drop of blood on them.

That's a good sign. Act the captive. Pretend Voldon is a godsend. I stepped away from the wall, assertively. "It's about time Voldon got around to saving me. I'm Darla, his mate. Take me to my child."

A second soldier stepped into the room, sized me up from head to toe with a formidable gaze, and shot a speculative glance at the other man.

Would they play along?

“As you wish, mistress,” the first one who had arrived said in English.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Goro blasted into the Crellon ship and ejected the crew of three females into space in a life pod. Just killing them wasn't easy, he thought. They just might be someone else's mates. Slavers, yes. But anything but Mawshwucs. And there was no time to waste with Darla headed straight for Voldon's palace. The only way to save her was to use the Crellon spacecraft to hop wormhole relays, splicing the few wormholes between quadrants that I knew secret Crellon technology had been doing for a millennium. The clock counted down faster and faster.

If he didn't hurry, Darla would shape shift—our moment of truth only Darla would pay for in my absence. But Voldon would probably try to detain Darla's were-form long enough to capture me and throw us together in his arena. The animal had a thing for killing were-assassins in were-form in public.

This was not the time to fail my mate.

\* \* \* \*

Surprisingly, Darla found herself locked in an extremely clean private containment cell aboard a spacecraft instead of taken straight away to Voldon. Two guards had been left to protect me, she noted. But who needed protection from air? Albeit the gown's spaghetti straps and dipping v-neck didn't provide much warmth. Was this some omen that Goro died when they blew up the starship?

My gut flopped at the thought.

Negative thoughts will do me in. I've got to believe he's coming for me because my imprisonment meant Voldon must have reservations about my time spent on *The Seeker* with his arch rival. But things could be far worse. The guards hadn't touched me. *Crellon ethics apparently aren't universal*. I still packed my syringe—a three-day reprieve from shape shifting on a good day inside my boot. Unfortunately, my blood-lust symptoms without a sexual reprieve would definitely suggest pregnancy. Since two days had passed en route through wormholes, asteroid belts, and even nebulae. Two shots were gone...

Apparently, Voldon hid out on his turf while he sent out his dogs to do his dirty work. I have to hand it to the bastard. His guards did what they were told without any missteps. Nobody even spoke to me. Nothing. Not even *a get a move on* was uttered.

Nor did anyone cast me one unkind look.

They delivered my food—something akin to home cooking from earth. Voldon apparently still toiled to gain my favoritism by using familiar things to win me over. All of which was a good sign for someone who needed all the time she could manage to accumulate. So I have three days, universe. Where is my mate? I slid my gaze across the sterile white floor to the guard beyond a cell wall composed of an energy grid.

The guard with a reptilian look, either scales or a natural patterning to his skin that gave the impression of scales, slid another covered dish of food through the slot at the bottom of my glowing containment wall by using the end of his long alien wooden weapon to prod the plate into motion.

I'm definitely not being tortured by starvation.

Where was Goro? Three days. I have three bloody days before I can't control the blood

lust. And then I have no cards left to play. That is if Voldon doesn't know I'm mated.

Could he know? In regards to my treatment, I'd think he had no clue. Factor in how clueless these guards were when I'd secretly shot up with my back turned to them.

But how far will secrets carry me?

I need you, Goro.

\* \* \* \*

Two shots later, the guards led Darla down the starship's sterile corridor toward a display of dangling masks. Why did those rubber lovelies make me want to run back to my cell? Maybe the fact that the planet the spacecraft landed upon wasn't anything like home had something to do with the urge.

One by one, the guards yanked the masks over their heads, positioning them over their faces.

The reptilian guard handed her one. "Wear this."

Thank the universe Lizard Guy's first words I heard since my capture were helpful. If the mask had been anything other than a visor with some backless soft rubbery seal around the edges, I would have been screwed and looked the idiot in trying to put on the contraption. But the universe seemed to want to spare me more embarrassment today. I copied what the guards had done with their masks.

The soft seal latched onto the contour of my face as if it had a mind of its own.

Weird. I drew a breath.

And another.

The air grew warm and moist inside the microenvironment.

They led me through an air lock and then outside, into bright blue light.

The palest blue light. So blue it was almost white. But not as white as on Earth. Or the masks were tinted.

*The Meditator's* crew trailed along single file, guarded by soldiers with torches—vile weapons that reduced organic materials to ash in a second. Weapons only cowards used to keep the enemy at a safe distance. Not something you want to find yourself on the business end of...

Everyone wore an air mask. Whatever the device filtered, it could keep on working. Although, it was nice to know I could rip off my mask and die. Or steal a torch from a guard. But risking exposing my true allegiance was stupid. I have one shot left. I'm holding out my telekinetic card until I have no choice but to steal a torch.

The winding trail of crew members in white uniforms meandered toward a giant transparent dome. Beyond the sparkling material thrust the most garish castle covered with frilly ornamentation and waving pennants at the tops of delicate towers topped with orbs. Unlike anything back on Earth. Whatever Voldon wanted presented to the world, sure looked strangely confusing. He was either pompous and frivolous or sending a message I couldn't decipher.

Nice approach to confusing the enemy.

The guards forced the captives through a gateway that looked anything but medieval. The framework was metallic and enthusiastically curvaceous, for the lack of a better description. Something optimistic glistened in the high sheen of the metal's swirls.

Why did I feel like I was reading everything wrong?

When the gate finally closed behind the winding column, the guards began removing their masks. But who breathed *what*?

Not all the captives cared to risk breathing the air without a filter. The guards rammed objects into *The Meditator's* crewmen until they all removed their masks.

Is this air okay to breathe? By the looks of those balking at testing the air, I ought to keep my mask on.

One of the guards poked my back with a torch.

Lizard Guy, prodding me to follow suit. *Do or die*. Oh well, maybe the problem will resolve itself with a few deep breaths. I wriggled my fingers beneath the mask's soft seal and popped it off.

Crisp fresh air like a fall day minus the cool temperature filled my lungs.

How can air be crisp without being cold? The answer had to be some planetary thing. Maybe some plant released a strange aroma.

The guards led me onward.

Through a bizarre place harboring tidy low walls fashioned from boulders, clean paths paved of stone, and all sorts of shrubbery carved in geometric shapes to match the metalwork at the gate and castle. I suppose I expected heads on pikes, piles of decomposing bodies, and refuse everywhere. Or at least serious destruction from warfare. But this odd garden-type-tidy-castle beauty totally shocked me.

The line of captives turned to wind around the castle's outer wall.

Apparently, we're the riffraff. Or so I thought until I ended up being guided directly onto the castle's grounds.

Lizard Guy ushered me to a large metal door decorated with all same the motif I'd passed along the castle's exterior, and he shoved the door wide.

The door fell into a brilliantly lit cavernous room filled with all sorts of humanoids wearing exotic outfits. Feathers, leather, glinting metals, gemstones, everything that could have been used to adorn a person was in that room on somebody's clothing. I guess not everything given nobody wore body parts... The crowd stood before sheets of shiny orange fabric, curtaining the far walls in the strange awkward silence of the world of mindspeak.

Good. Maybe I don't want to know what they're saying.

The crowd parted magically. A broad path led to a golden throne at least a football field away. Perched on his fancy chair, the scantily-clad dark-haired man I met over three years ago slouched with boredom. Or something. Voldon didn't seem to care I was present.

Lizard Guy nudged my elbow.

What now? Meet the little gremlin? Be forced to have sex with Voldon? Death wasn't such a bad thing now that I'm facing the bastard alone. Damn, didn't I tell Goro I was afraid of being alone? And here I stand even farther from Earth. Lost in deep space. Isolated wearing invisible shackles. A captive. For what? To borrow time. Crazy Darla, pay attention. You're up.

What would Voldon do?

Okay. I just need to play it cool.

Voldon couldn't read lesser-evolved minds. So, my thoughts are safe. I can lie till I run out of blood. Then I'll just have to rip some heads off in big bad wolf form. *Run for my life*. Do the general mayhem thing until Goro shows up, or I die. I inhaled and headed across the ocean of smooth tile.

"Darla," Voldon called out where he leaned into the crook of his throne.

He only wore a breechcloth and an enormous double-stranded necklace of white metal and large green stones that hung down his chest to his navel. The fool didn't even bother to wear shoes. What's the point?

Don't get caught with your pants down, moron.

My heart sank at the memory of Goro's statement.

Would I ever see him again? Yes. Dammit. Crazy Darla has arrived to clean house.

"I see you've come back to me. It's as if fate willed it." Voldon shot me a smug smile.

I seriously doubt the natural order of things wanted anything to do with a person who uses mind control to dominate others. "Three years, Voldon! I thought I'd never get off those horrid free-thinking starships." I forced a brilliant smile. What's next? Better work on a nice safe subject. "So I hear you have something of mine."

A chuckle rumbled from the throne.

Voldon stared in my direction as if he had a monster hard-on and was just about to lick his lips.

Where are the Crellons when you need them? They could have a party here with him.

Voldon waved a hand that casually hung from his elbow resting against one of the throne's arm.

How could he just sit there while my life dangled so precariously? How? Oh yeah, he was an *animal*.

"Bring in Rellerk to meet his mother," Voldon thundered.

What a name. I would have thought of a better one. Something totally different. Something *mine*.

Movement behind a long orange curtain to the left set the sheet of fabric fluttering. A barefoot child, toddler aged, ran out wearing the same breechcloth Voldon wore, straight to Voldon and stood at his knee.

At least the gremlin didn't run to me.

"Say hello to your mother, Rellerk," Voldon instructed.

The child carefully studied me.

Cautiously. If he had any of my genes—those genes would be the ones wielding caution. Or the child didn't understand English. Why in the world was Voldon speaking English to his child an unimaginable distance from Earth? I suppose I need to act agreeable. "Hello, Rellerk. My you're a big boy."

Voldon's intrigued mask split with a grin. "I knew you'd be happy to see him."

Apparently he really couldn't read my mind. "When I heard about my son, I couldn't wait to meet him." Hopefully, Rellerk didn't want to have anything to do with me. But feigning happiness would undoubtedly save my ass. I threw out my arms. "Come give me a hug."

Rellerk just watched me with indifference.

Voldon grabbed the boy beneath his shoulders and hefted him onto his lap. "He'll warm up to you soon enough." Voldon shot me a wink with all that casual familiar Earth language. "It's not every day one meets his mother."

This was all too damned freaky. I'm still not buying who's the mama here. "Who can blame the child?" I chanced a step toward them. "I thought you'd never come for me." I faked a tumultuous sigh.

"Anything for you, Darla."

To think the creep still thought I was interested in him. I suppose that's good. But he needs to lock me in a tower until Goro arrives. Out of sight. Out of mind. Just what was I supposed to say next? What now? Do we conquer the rest of the universe? I scanned the crowd to the left just to look curious about something.

"Show my mate to her chamber."

\* \* \* \*

What appeared to be a day's sunset, night, and sunrise passed with Darla in absolute seclusion. She realized her personal chamber turned out to be the Voldonian equivalent to a tower room. Nice locked door. Sick monstrosity of a curtained bed sporting endless layers of orange bedding. One large floor mirror. And no indication that Voldon would be joining me other than the bed looked like a sex pit. I posed the kept woman in front of the mirror and studied my long sexy blue gown's wispy reflection.

What in the world does Voldon want from me?

When he learns I can't give him a sexually-bound shifting mate, what will he do? And there was nothing left to think or do. I had slept on the bed, paced, and stared at myself in the mirror until I had to break down and shoot up again. Since I joined, The Cause, my life had become something akin to the actresses in those porn movies. I had sex. And more sex. Shot up. Then was locked away until my services were needed again. Albeit, I was celibate for three years. But this is how I feel about everything *now*.

Maybe this was Father's Hell? I'd gone and bound myself to a powerful charismatic barbarian who I'd fallen in love with twice. And I was taken from him only to be thrown into solitary confinement by the universe's nut job who somehow genetically engineered my son.

No. I'm not getting all soft and mushy over that kid.

Yes. This is definitely Hell. I've got one last dose of Goro's blood. The clock is ticking until I start hurling. Now, how does a person escape? I treaded my well-worn path back to the narrow arrow-slit window to stare at the eerie world cast in blue.

Everywhere, the castle guards littered the castle grounds in red uniforms. The gate was almost red because of the number of guards clustered at the frilly metalwork. How could Goro save me with all these damned guards? The only way to get out of this mess began to look more and more like saving myself. The clock ticked far too quickly to wait much longer. And escape seemed impossible.

The door squealed and swung open into my room.

Who was there? I headed back toward the center of the room to see.

Lizard Guy stood out in the green hallway, watching me.

What was he waiting for?

"Voldon requests your presence. Hurry." The alien landed his palm on his torch as if to warn me not to balk.

Why not? An opportunity for Crazy Darla to check out her surroundings might provide escape options. My clicking footsteps followed the guard and I down to the same grand hall where Voldon sat on the same throne in disgusting opulence.

Nothing along the line of escape came to mind in passing doors and descending the winding staircase. Not one whisper from the parted crowd dared imply a means of escape where I stood before my captor and son.

How am I going to get out of here? I've got one shot left.

"Join me," Voldon commanded.

As in love and war?

Her gut curdled.

Lizard Guy nudged me toward Voldon.

Oh, as in proximity. As long as Voldon keeps his hands off of me, things are going to be okay. I climbed the five agonizing steps to stand where Voldon pointed almost effortlessly with a wave of a palm.

Right next to him.

His disgusting arm snaked out around my waist, pulling me against the biting frame of his throne.

“I’ve been waiting for you, my love mate,” Voldon called, a demanding smile upon his face.

So my solitary confinement was to ensure any thought I had about escape was futile?

His hand petted my gown.

Or my hip beneath the fabric. Talk about having balls.

\* \* \* \*

Walking past Voldon’s nonresponsive guards was the most unnerving experience to Goro. The most any soldier managed was to look in his direction.

This was a trap. Nothing more. Nothing less. Voldon expected me to follow this path all along after he captured my mate. And the chase, the game was the part Voldon thrived upon. The bastard is toying with the wrong warrior. I approached the guard at the castle’s large metal door.

The guard heaved the massive hatch wide.

Past planet Svalor’s cleansing blue light, Voldon poised upon his dais in golden light cast beyond the castle entry. Even worse, Darla leaned against the bastard’s throne in a manner nobody would evaluate as anything other than seductive. But she craned her upper body away from the bastard. Awkwardly. She obviously hated standing there.

My blood boiled an unusual heat for an Xquine.

No touching my mate.

Sweat beaded across my brow.

Albeit, the blood lust is upon me. Anything could make my blood boil. And one fatal mistake could cause me to ruin my last chance in righting the universe back along Destiny’s path. I must remain calm.

Nobody shouted or opened a channel through mindspeak.

The worst kind of hand-to-hand combat. Mental. The preferred approach of dangerous highly-evolved psychics whose powers had merged into telepathy and manifested in the disgusting choice of mind control. No, it’s not enough for some beings to have the ability to read the minds of others. To always understand a person. No. A power-hungry being like Voldon must possess others. But now Voldon’s inability to control me has led me to his place through a personal vendetta. And here I stand right where he wants me.

But he won’t play me like his puppet. I stepped into the great hall’s orange ambience. Orange, the color known for encouragement. Was this a joke? Voldon struck me as the dominant black type.

The ridiculously-dressed crowd of nobles from all of the universe’s cultures Voldon conquered witnessed each of Goro’s footsteps in their forced act of paying homage to their emperor. Silently they observed me. Perhaps hoping I would be the one to end the madness of their lives. To release their worlds from mind-control subjugation. Or the point of this stage of the game was to embarrass me by holding my mate captive before an audience? To put me in my place as they say on Earth.

Darla’s pained expression showed she didn’t care for her new status.

Kill me now. Or die when I shape shift in a few hours. Something was going to end very very soon.

“Why have you come?” Voldon questioned in English. “You’re disturbing my happy family’s reunion.”



Darla winced.

Voldon would die before I left this world. But guards lurked everywhere wielding torches. A torch would vaporize Voldon. So, something else unfolded. Just mind games. He wants to prove he's stronger than I am. "You have something of mine. I'll have it back now."

"There hasn't been anything to take from Xquine in years. Except your honor."

How could any warrior ignore the cretin's insulting an entire planet's legacy while standing there deep in the blood lust? I inhaled deeply to maintain a calm exterior. "I can see the woman can't stand your touch." I scanned all of the sets of emotionless eyes to search for agreement somewhere in Voldon's court then met Voldon's dark gaze.

Anger flashed therein.

"Throw him in the dungeon," Voldon shouted.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Goro's mate would never live freely if he died a fool's death fighting guards packing torches. Better to wait for another opportunity for liberation than throw everything to ashes. Just wait. So I stood before the guard's at torch point.

Voldon shoved Darla toward Goro. "And throw his mate in with him. Maybe he'll accidentally tear her from limb to limb." The bastard let out a demonic cackle.

So Voldon knew we had mated.

By the time I grabbed Darla before she crashed into our containment cell's solid back wall, I began to feel lightheaded. In a few hours I would transmute into fangs and fur. And Voldon would pull us into his arena to try to kill us.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do. I did what you said." Darla wrapped her arms around my shoulders and sank into my chest. "I hid my telekinesis. Tell me what to do."

Just her touch seemed to cleanse my mind of the blood lust's nausea. I snaked held her tightly. Just for a moment. To help her feel safe again. "I didn't expect you to know what to do." That was truth. "How long have you been here?"

"Since yesterday. I have one shot left."

"I'm here. You don't have to worry about that now." Or at least until we're thrown into Voldon's coliseum. Voldon would certainly try to kill us himself. To convince the crowd how invincible he thought himself to be. "We're going to have to work together now."

She sucked in a long deep breath and leaned back to look into his eyes.

Fearless she was once again.

"I'm ready," she said. "He's going to throw us into his little game pit. Right?"

Crazy Darla probably was ready. And she knew what to expect. "Yes. He doesn't have your powers. He can invade minds and control weaker beings. But he can't invade yours. You can beat him with telekinesis, Darla." Or she'd have to try, especially if anything happened to me.

"What about you?"

I'll work on ripping him limb from limb. "He won't throw us into the arena until I've shifted."

Her brow pinched. "When will you?"

"In about two earth hours."

She threw her head to the side and sighed as if something were wrong. "I used a syringe a few hours ago. I'm sorry. I never can time these things right."

We were better off with her in human form with her telekinetic power. "You did what you had to do. And you will again soon enough."

She shot me an understanding glance. "Just be careful. I don't want to live without you."

Those words hit me right in the soul. I'd be cursed if I didn't survive this final battle.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

The ravenous hunger for blood, the tremors, and the nausea came upon Goro before he could devise a better plan. But a plan was a plan, he noted. The smell my mate's sex only made my blood sizzle more. I could almost taste her flesh in simply licking the air.

A tingling prickled under my skin.

The shifting. I'm becoming an animal for first time of my life. I caught Darla in my arms and stared into her brown eyes. "The change is upon me."

Those eyes widened fifty percent. "What will happen? Are you just going to bite me?"

A pain shot through my arms.

Not if what were-assassins say is true. I should have a lot of self-control. "No." She'd seen many were-assassins in were-form. But seeing it and experiencing it were two different things. "They'll come for us. They have to. We're the star entertainment at the midday feast. My plan is to throw you over my shoulder and run. When I do, hang on. If at any point in time you think using your telekinesis will help us, by all means, go for it."

The world shifted, growing smaller before my gaping mate. My leather clothing began to rip. My skin began falling off in chunks.

\* \* \* \*

Darla could only stand there and watch her mate stretch inches overhead as his human skin fell off. He had a distorted horror-type muzzle with nasty teeth. Jagged teeth that could make a population stampede. And his hands weren't really hands anymore. More like arthritic clawed digits. He could probably grab as good as other were-assassins I'd seen in action. But it wasn't like he was going to try to play a piccolo. Everybody was certain to haul ass, everyone except a were-assassin's soul mate. A were-assassin in were-form would trash whoever it came upon while searching for blood to satiate its blood lust. And hopefully he wasn't going to bite a hunk out of me.

Would he attack me to end his discomfort? He was Xquine. And they tended to be volatile—according to what I'd learned. If the blood lust were any indication, I'm about to get gnawed. Hopefully, he could control himself. Like how he did before releasing that deep jungle sound after climaxing. Or we'd never get out of imprisonment.

Someone started screaming.

It's not me. My mouth is closed. Thank the stars. And Goro said to wait. He'd doze his way out of Dodge. I took a step back toward the cell's glowing bars, giving him more room to move.

Guards suddenly stood before their cell.

But Goro towered before me. Controlled by some inner intelligence. That's my mate. By the assessing look in his eye, he meant to follow his plan. If anyone could, the indomitable Xquine warrior could stick with a plan. I stared into his unique burning orange eyes.

A familiar shadow danced in those glittery orbs.

My mate was in there, buried down underneath the fur and fangs. And he recognized me.

The containment wall suddenly blinked and disappeared.

Why? Apparently, Voldon just allowed the were-wolves to run into his trap.

Goro's furry arms threw me over his shoulder in one rough sweep.  
So he didn't act like or look like a hunky fireman from earth. I wasn't about to argue.  
He followed his plan. Let's cheer for his ability to recall said plan in were-form.  
We plowed through the corridor.  
Would the guards pursue? I shoved off Goro's back enough to twist my head around.  
Lizard Guy watched me with a hint of curiosity in his expression.  
Was someone going to torch us?  
Effortlessly, Goro rounded a corner and plowed onward where only I could see his furry legs and feet.

Blue light showed between those lower limbs.  
They must be approaching the arena he mentioned. This coliseum. If it is anything like the one in historic Rome, I don't want to join in those blood baths.  
Speaking of blood, my head became quite warm from the blood draining into my head. It even seemed harder to breathe as I bobbed slung across his shoulder.

Goro stepped through a doorway and into a sandpit.  
Joy. Sand wasn't the best thing to run through. Voldon would have the upper hand. Or would he when facing a were-assassin?

A loud noise shrieked away the silence.  
The sand slowed Goro a bit. But he planted himself a good distance from where we entered and turned, apparently assessing his surroundings.  
Hell. I couldn't see much of anything. Throw in the pounding blood in my head and I needed to get vertical again. Pushing up was totally out of the question. Maybe Goro would cooperate. "Put me down. I can't see or think in this position."

Goro tightened his grip on the back of my legs.  
"It's okay to put me down, Goro. I can help you more if I'm thinking clearly."  
The crowd fell silent.  
Why? If only I could see. "Put me down." I pounded the course hair, *uh* fur, on his unyielding back for emphasis.

The world blurred as my feet swung to the ground. And kept moving. The shift in position made me more than a bit lightheaded and dizzy. I blinked away the delirium and found Voldon climbing atop a squatty boulder in his new black leather outfit. He seemed prepared for hand-to-claw combat now, or just self-confident. Did he fancy himself the equivalent of a were-assassin dressed in black?

Long pikes stabbed toward the clear sky in an immobile act of protecting the mad man, encircling the stadium. Each pointed rod held a skull on the end. A humanoid's rotten skull, bones littering the poles' bases where other skulls had lost enough tissue to fall.

Who lost their heads? This was more like the Voldon I expected. Ruthless. Evil. Self-serving.

And something sparkled here and there around the base of the spears. The crystal skulls. How many? Quickly, I counted, peering around Goro's fur.

Twelve. Screw Voldon. We win no matter what. He'd never have the last skull to create his super weapon.

Goro shoved my body behind his massive form.  
I must have annoyed him in my summation of skulls. How could I monitor with Voldon's actions given I could see nothing of significance now? Grant it, I'm standing here in liquid silk wearing nothing but black mercenary boots beneath it...

Nobody made a sound.

Not even a breeze had the courage to raise a voice.

Right. Everything was being discussed in mindspeak. So, I'm insignificant again? "What in the Hell is going on?" I leaned around Goro's hairy elbow and shouted at Voldon's leather-clad smug persona.

Voldon eyed me with a sinister grin.

Something evil mocked in his calm features. "It's time for you to die."

Goro let loose the most ungodly roar.

A sound of rage that set the pikes shaking their bones. Even my soul quivered.

Voldon didn't let the noise sway him. He carelessly hopped off the boulder and dropped into a combat crouch producing some long metallic rod like a weapon.

Spare me. Goro could bend that into the shape of a clown's dachshund balloon with both paws tied behind his back. "Don't you have a weapon that can do a little damage?"

Voldon's grin soured. His pole sprouted fin-shaped blades on both ends.

Goro roared again.

Christ almighty. Someone was going to die today. Why do I feel like I'm running with the bulls? At least my gown wasn't flaming red. Although it could be after a few moments of blood shedding.

Goro sprang toward Voldon, flipping through the air, and got a grip on the weapon near Voldon's handhold, landing on his hind legs, pulling Voldon overhead. But Voldon jumped away into his combat crouch, weaponless.

Not one sound erupted from the audience.

Goro held the weapon overhead in a twisted pretzel shape.

I knew it.

In a smear of movement, Voldon sent a knife thumping into Goro's shoulder.

That meant my mate would fight injured. Not alone. Never alone. We'd go to our graves knowing that much. Now I'll create a diversion. I focused deep inside myself to conjure up the telekinetic force hidden but a thought away...

The sounds of the awestruck wind began to riddle grains of sand into a spray of dust around the arena.

Voldon shot me a hideous grin.

That bastard just needed a knee in his big-ass balls. Now, to find a projectable knee.

\* \* \* \*

Goro watched as the skulls ringing the coliseum began to glow. Oh, to yank up the pikes and jab them through Voldon's eye sockets, he mused. Or rip off his arms. But somebody needed to stand between Darla and Voldon.

Sand whipped around the arena, against my ankles, biting my skin.

Voldon inched toward my mate.

*Protect her.*

Rage welled up inside me until it burst forth in the loudest torrent of anger my body could release.

Each skull shot a beam at Darla, locking onto her body.

Voldon paused.

What was that light? And what was she doing, staring at the ground before her feet?

"Wake up, Darla," I thought I said but couldn't hear the words. Just another roar.

Was that energy some death ray? Since the skulls vacillated between being friend and

foe with everyone, we had to get the Hell out of this arena.

Voldon produced another glinting knife and hurled it at her.

I leapt toward the glinting blade.

But the knife hit the light, bounced high into the air, and arched back to land at her boot. Small objects began whizzing across the arena at Voldon. He snarled at me and turned back to my mate.

A steel rod zipped past my head and stabbed into Voldon's thigh. Voldon grabbed at the harpoon, yanking, in the rising cloud of flying arena litter. To no avail. He'd need some help ripping that metal from his body. I'd happily assist. *With something.* I stepped toward him.

Voldon jerked out another blade from a boot and threw it at me.

Futilely. His pain had to be a distraction. I dodged the knife and trotted toward him.

He dragged his impaled leg away, from me and Darla.

The skulls' lights suddenly clicked off.

Darla's head tilted skyward and she collapsed into a pile of silk and limbs.

Voldon halted, mesmerized.

Too mesmerized. With one shove of bent legs, I pounced on him, ramming his face into the sand while wrapping my fingers around his neck, and squeezed.

Something hit my back.

Pain. Shooting pain shafted from my shoulder down to my lower back, wrapping around my body. I had to get up. I had to squeeze that scrawny neck. I couldn't do anything but breathe.

Objects fell onto the arena's sandy floor like hail, pounding my head and back. But lacking momentum to make a deadly blow. Obviously too late to spare me injury. I had to get the damned thing stuck in my shoulder out. I released Voldon, fell away from him, and reached for the object.

But Darla needed me.

What did Destiny hold for my mate who lay in a heap at the arena's center? She needed my help. *Protect her.* I grabbed the slick small metal object in my shoulder and yanked, to produce a knife. The first knife Voldon had hurled at Darla. She must have sent it flying with psychokinesis and lost control over the weapon when she passed out.

Now for Voldon. I climbed to my feet and turned.

Voldon faced me, feet squared, blood pouring down his leg, glaring. He'd managed to pull the rod out of his body. He snarled, knees bent as if he meant to box.

Injured and pissed, the man was still deadly. Or a fool would think otherwise. But could he wrestle a were-wolf and win? Well, I could walk without pain. He couldn't. Who had the upper hand? But with the crystal skulls waiting, watching, anything could happen. Especially after their energy took out Darla.

*Protect her.*

Time to kill Voldon. I circled him.

Voldon chuckled, menacingly.

He couldn't have any way to defend himself. Unless he'd hidden something somewhere in the arena. The bastard. But everyone watched. Everyone would see if he fought honorably. Time to kill him before he fought like the bastard he truly was. I leapt at him.

He threw up his arms and tried to shove me back.

Futilely. My weight rocked him. Knocked him onto his back.

He threw sand in my face.

Not a major distraction. I blinked and shook my head, then rolled him onto his gut, bending his arm backward, pinning him down.

He squirmed delightfully.

He smelled of salty metallic ambrosia. Blood.

Just to lock my jaws around the back of his neck. Bite. Snap his head off. But why not take him back to The Cause so the rest of the universe watched him die? Why not extend his suffering?

Darla groaned and rustled in the sand.

No. I wouldn't risk her life again. I grabbed Voldon's round head, twisted, and ripped off the odd sphere with uncanny ease. The skull reminded me of the crystal skulls. But then it was hideous lacking the beauty of the crystalline jewels to entrance those who laid eyes upon it. Voldon was simply hideous. Dethroned he was. I hurled the dripping head into the audience and turned to Darla's limp form.

The universe would be at peace now. And my mate.

Was she alive? She could have been worse off. Fried by the skulls' energy.

Movement around the arena danced in my periphery. I scanned the audience. They quickly departed. As it should be. The imprisoned nobles are free to return to their home worlds.

And the salty metallic smell of the blood coursing beneath Darla's skin called to me.

She's alive. He leaned close to savor the scent pulsing just beneath her creamy white skin. So close to her pulsing blood that I trailed my tongue out to lick her salty skin. She was so helpless. So, mine. I grated me teeth not to bite her. But I needed to transmute into human form. To heal my wounds in the process. To save her. I scratched a cut in her arm just enough to draw a few beads of blood and took my libation. If nobody decided to kill me while I recovered from the exhaustion caused by shifting, we would depart soon.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Darla woke with a start, feeling sluggish like she had a major hangover. Voldon was trying to kill us, she recalled. Shit! I shoved up from the sinking sand and found my barbarian lying next to me in all his nude humanoid glory. He'd been in were-form before I passed out. Not anymore. Now he was all man.

My head swooned.

*Ugh.* I steadied it with a palm.

Just where was everyone? The stadium seating looked like a ghost town. Beyond Goro's body laid a decapitated body. Dressed in black. Voldon's choice of attire hadn't helped his mojo. But what about my mate? Was Goro dead too? That would be truly unbelievable given Destiny promised us a future. Should I touch him? Check him to see if he's warm and breathing? Did I want to know if he's ice cold?

Or is it better I just wait? Life was so much easier working with flowers.

Goro moaned.

Thank the universe for small favors. I ran a hand across his chest. "Goro?"

His eyelids flicked open.

Knowing the shifting drew from a person's energy reserves, it would be cruel to ask him a lot of questions. He'd need time to get over the shape shifting. But I missed everything. At least the important parts of the battle. "What happened here?"

"Voldon was distracted by the skulls' light and your telekinesis. I killed him," Goro managed to force some words from his lips.

Better you than me. I shot him a smile. "You can be my hero any day."

A sharp pain shot through my temple.

He chuckled softly. "Good because you're stuck with me." He managed to sit up and gazed around the quiet arena. "They didn't take the crystal skulls."

"Who?"

"The audience." He met my gaze. "Do you remember what happened?"

"No."

"The skulls got the better of Voldon. They distracted him so much that I could kill him."

Would things have happened differently without the intervening skulls?

Another pain shafted through my skull.

I rubbed the spot.

Goro labored to slide a palm across my arm. "How do you feel?"

"Like I was hit by an eighteen wheeler. Awful. Hung over. If only we brought a healer." I shot him a wink.

"I don't know what the skulls did to you. But each one lined a beam of light onto you. And I have no idea what will come of it."

Well, I'm sitting up. "Do you think we can just leave?"

"We'll have to." He arched one black eyebrow. "Xquine warriors cause quite a fluster. But nude Xquine warriors are even more fascinating." He winked back.

Maybe it was the mysterious Xquine penis? "Should we just walk out of here?"



“Now.” He rose and extended a helpful palm.

We managed to cross the empty castle grounds, locate some masks, tie a piece of cloth around Goro’s waist, and climb aboard the Crellon ship without being stopped by anyone.

“Buckle up,” Goro told me where I stood beside a pilot seat.

“Like I want to sit in that germ-coated chair.”

“We’ll be back among The Cause’s starships before you know it. Just grit your teeth and settle in.”

Fine. If that’s what it takes to love an alien. I buckled in for takeoff.

\* \* \* \*

Days passed before we managed to find a free-thinking starship. But no time was wasted in Darla’s mind. With the ship completely to ourselves, we found the germs didn’t really bother me too much to keep me from alleviating my blood lust with some good old-fashioned sex. Nor was anything boring about my barbarian pinning me down and taking what he wanted. Especially when every tatter of communication they came across noted Goro and I had defeated Voldon. That a Jennian priest died the day Voldon died. That it all happened on winter solstice 2012, according to Earth’s calendar. Talk about one bizarre cause for celebration after another. Maybe the new year’s first lengthening day was actually a sign of the universe’s new age of growth? Who knows? I’m just a flower girl. But the news had spread.

Apparently with every escaping alien on that planet, one more humanoid returned home to pass on the word that Goro and I had saved the universe’s oppressed peoples. And now we were about to report to the Free World Council. “What do you think they’ll say now that you’ve shifted the power structure of the universe?” I asked Goro where he sat punching buttons on the Crellon ship’s control panel.

Dressed in his new black leather vest, long jacket, pants, and boots, he almost looked like the Goro everyone remembered. But he still had that long ponytail. I’ll just call it a badge of honor.

He shot me a serious glance. “We can never know.”

Oh, spare me the evasive philosophy. “You can’t convince me you don’t want some kind of acknowledgement that you came through even after they stripped you of your command.”

He shrugged. “I did as Destiny demanded.”

The man was too humble. Destiny doesn’t seem to know squat about the future. I don’t have tender breasts, cravings, or morning sickness. The computer knows more about my earthling body than Destiny. But I wasn’t going to tell him I wasn’t pregnant. If I had been, I wasn’t anymore. Who knows what the skulls’ light did to me.

The spacecraft suddenly sat still and quiet.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

Why not? I rose.

He turned to me, carefully, and tilted my chin up so my gaze met his. “And if you don’t mind, please let me do the talking.”

Oh! I’d managed to lose all his faith in me back on Titan. “I won’t embarrass you. Promise.”

“You’re just as important here as I am, heart of my heart.” He planted a soft warm kiss on my lips. “But I want to hear what they want to say and find someplace to plow fertile fields.”

Anything to get back to satiating the blood lust. “Fine.”

\* \* \* \*

Goro led his mate before the Free World Council to learn what the future held for were-

assassins. The Council had grown considerably in size, he noted. Many cultures were represented now that they were liberated from enslavement. I'd probably hear about allowing Voldon's son to escape. But for the most part, the Council shouldn't have any significant complaints. Everyone was free to return to their home worlds and pick up where they left off. That's if they even had a home world to return to and their home worlds hadn't changed significantly. How the Council planned to handle planetary issues that would certainly develop would be interesting. Between political, economic, or ideological issues, the universe was anything but out of the proverbial deep waters of mayhem yet.

Arken stood among the circular rings of seats among the Council members and nodded at Goro.

A good omen to see. Down on the bottom row, Arken's position among the heads of worlds only indicated his high status among the members. Goro halted where those called before a session waited to hear about their futures.

The councilors settled down.

All but Arken who stood before them all. "Welcome our hero, Goro, and his mate, Darla," Arken spoke in English. "You two have accomplished the impossible. You ended Voldon's tyranny. And we thank you."

A series of bright lights rose as the Council waved their lighted wands in agreement with Arken.

"Thank you, commander." Goro offered the obligatory nod.

"We shall see if time proves our plan for you is founded in great wisdom," Arken added. Wise plans often proved as faulty as Voldon's. What plan did Arken note?

"We worry the next few decades will see many planets in turmoil as they haven't had control of their worlds for hundreds or thousands of years. We'll refer to these times of immense stress as transitional and hope all peoples come to what they believe is a happy co-existence. Until then, we have decided to use the were-assassins to aid those populations who might require off-world intervention. So, Goro, we ask you and your wife to lead this great free-thinking endeavor we wish to call The Order of the Marshals. Through your blessed vision, the universe's children will be able to see their souls live happy fruitful existences."

The circular room lit up with light wands again.

Maybe I should argue against such ridiculous praise. But there's a chance to mold the universe into a living breathing heartbeat of heart and soul melded by thought and freedoms. And they asked Darla and I to set up this program to supervise worlds in transition? Although, it sounded simpler in Arken's terms. Would Darla agree? I turned to her.

She smiled a quirky half smile.

That was probably just a sign she couldn't believe they'd given up on her *crazy* nickname.

"Since I don't see how I could ever go back to my monotonous life on earth, I say let's do it," she blurted.

Well I still couldn't read her mind. So, I'd better stop guessing what she was thinking. With Rellerk out there, keeping the were-assassins alive might be the only way to ensure Voldon doesn't reincarnate and try to conquer the universe.

"We recommend you set up a base at Titan now that Shandul has passed. So, we send you to Titan with the hope that your endeavor to guide reconstruction throughout the universe will flourish in the light of Jennian peace."

\* \* \* \*

On Titan inside her personal quarters, Darla held her tiny daughter in the white silk wrap that Goro insisted on using to swaddle the newborn. After her first child miscarried, she didn't think she'd ever be happy again. That was after he thought I was pregnant before they killed Voldon. It had killed me how I couldn't provide him with that simple solution to all his problems with just a pregnancy. But the second, or even if it was the third, pregnancy went well. So well that now he had his Lianna.

But Goro had said nothing as his dreams died with each failing ghost of a pregnancy. I tucked my fingertip into the tiniest fist I'd ever seen. "And don't worry. Your father will ensure you have a brother or sister before long." Truth be known, I loved having babies. Childbirth was a different can of worms.

Giving birth hadn't been easy. Allowing a healer to ease my pain was just too intimate with all that touching and chanting. Women just didn't have babies that way back home in my neck of the woods. So, surviving the experience with no more than my husband for support, pain and all, to stare into my daughter's orange eyes proved a wonder in itself. Lianna's tiny eyes didn't sparkle like Goro's though. But he swore the fire would ignite in them by her first birthday.

The baby shifted, opening her lips as if hoping for a nipple.

Again? We'll see. I stuck a fingertip between those tiny lips.

Lianna tried to clamp on with the strength of a mousetrap.

Nobody goes hungry in my house. I shifted my gown and held the baby to my nipple.

Lianna's mouth snapped onto the tender tissue.

Yikes. But motherhood was motherhood. Although becoming numb to the sensation would be nice, I didn't want any part of missing out on the aspect of motherhood. Sure, I lost some freedom. But the giving of oneself to a child, becoming its lifeline to the world, completely changed one's perspective. Like suddenly waking up to realize being free no longer mattered. Not that liberation was part of the long battle to get this far. Everyone struggled for freedom of thought the past five years since my arrival on *The Seeker*. And Goro was free from the burden of bringing the child of legend to life so now he could focus on organizing the Marshals.

The door to their personal quarters swooshed open.

Goro strode into the room wearing little more than black leather and a hint of a smile.

The baby had changed him, loosened him up a bit. He was still the barbarian commander who now wore a long black ponytail. But a new gleam in his eyes had brightened his stoic mask since he held his child for the first time. It most likely was the flame for Xquine. He never let on how his daughter would give birth to more children with those Xquine eyes. But his soul declared the knowledge to anyone who crossed his path in one undying blast of Xquine enthusiasm.

Goro ran some fingers across Lianna's few strands of black hair, sat on the bed at my side, and leaned down to latch onto my mouth with his soft lips.

My soul melted into a pool of aching and longing.

A place for them to swim in love and light. But I was too torn up from childbirth to wrap my legs around him and fuse our souls into one. I slid fingers into the base of his tightly bound silky hair of his ponytail and opened my mouth to his wet heat and probing tongue.

He kissed me deeply, lovingly, longingly.

So deeply I almost broke into tears. My life was so complete now.

He pulled back from me to gaze into my eyes. "I have to leave for a few weeks."

Leave? “But—”

He gently placed a finger over my lips. “Anshee has promised to help you until I return. Care for you by threat of punishment.” He smiled. “I don’t want to leave you alone. But I must take two healers to Quadrant Four. A planet lies on the brink of civil war.” Something danced across his handsome features. “And when I return, you’ll be well enough to wet nurse your husband.”

Leave it to Goro to fantasize about breasts when I’m about to be left holding the loose ends of The Order of the Marshals while he goes gallivanting across the universe to save the day. But he seemed so happy now deep in his duty. “What do you want me to do while you’re gone?”

“Stay in bed.”

What? “I can supervise just as easily with or without a baby.”

“I’ve assigned duties. The were-assassins will train the new volunteers. When you’re completely healed, you can help me. For now, just heal thyself.”

Oh, if I weren’t so stubborn, I’d call a healer to smooth over all this childbirth injury. And then Crazy Darla could take this barbarian by the hair and show him who was boss. But I didn’t want to miss out on recovering from childbirth. Something about the whole stage of transition felt like a badge of victory to be worn for all to witness. Nor did I want to rush things and miss out on this whole mother thing. “Alright. Who are you taking on your little adventure?”

His eyelids pinched shut a bit.

Perturbed? Oh yes. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. I gulped back a chuckle.

“Johnson and Aisling,” he said.

Johnson was a good idea. But Aisling couldn’t manage her healing powers at all. “You can’t take Aisling. She’s not ready to open a can of tuna fish let alone lay hands on a bleeding humanoid.”

“I know she is your favorite of all the un-mated earthlings. But she must be forced to use her gift or it will never grow.”

Easily said by someone who wasn’t forced to watch his mother die from cancer because Mom opted against psychic intervention. “So you’re going to take her into a toxic environment and force her to bend with the land’s social strife?”

Goro’s mask went stoic. “Do not counter decisions made for the greater good of humanity. Aisling is the most curious of the Marshals. I think her fascination with archaeology will carry over to the Luvks and curb their distrust of foreigners as well. She will be easily accepted. If not, Johnson will do.”

“Distrust? You’re kidding me. Aisling isn’t a warrior. She’s the most caring volunteer you’ve got in the bunch.” Why did I bother arguing? “So you’re taking my friend into a war because she’s curious?”

“Educated in social organization. Open-minded.”

“I understand her formal education can come in handy almost everywhere. But just what does being open-minded have to do with anything?”

“The Luvks are a highly secretive almost feline race who do not truly live in our universe.”

Just what did that mean?

“I see the question on your beautiful face, heart of my heart.” He traced a tickling finger

along her jaw line. “The world of the Luvks lies beyond a wormhole on a planet of winged humanoids accessible only by those who know the footpath through the portal. And with luck, the two healers who accompany me will find mates among the two populations. And then my duties of supervising the reconstruction on these planets will pass onto the two Marshals mated into those worlds. So, I need Johnson and Aisling because they are my best bets for acclimating to two extremely different cultures of humanoids.”

“So, you’re sending my friend to seek a mate with some cat race that doesn’t live anywhere you can reach by normal means in our universe?”

He nodded one patient respectful nod.

Seriously, what does the lunacy matter in worlds displaced by wormholes or portals? Or whatever the doorway is to their world? I’m living inside one of Saturn’s moons. Anything could happen. Thank goodness there wasn’t a Jennian priest around to utter circular points that never truly did anything other than give a girl a headache. And who needed a headache with a big barbarian afoot? Besides, Aisling volunteered.

Goro shoved my palm against his hard shaft hidden inside his leather pants. “Know I will miss every moment I’m away from you, heart of my heart.” He growled like something feral lurked deeply inside him. “And when I return, you will soothe the savage beast as they say on earth.”

“I love it when you talk dirty to me.” I shot him a wink and gave his cock a gratuitous squeeze. “But when the baby gets a little older, maybe you should wait until she’s out of earshot.”

“That didn’t keep you from learning about love and lust before mating.”

I told him I’d never admit to watching those porn flicks.

“Johnson and Aisling will be settled into their new positions as Marshals soon. Soon enough to allow me to return to my family.” He lifted my palm to his soft lips. “Families have a way of taming the wild nature inside a man. At least what needs to be tamed,” he whispered the warm words into my hand, his gaze sliding to lock on mine, and lowered my knuckles to my lap. “The flawed beast now welcomes his Destiny.”

“The only flawed being I know is headless now. And he was nothing more than a wild animal. You were never flawed.” I shot forward into his warm chest, carefully clutching the baby, wrapped an arm around his stiff shoulder, and stared into his eyes. “The only difference is you’ve started smiling more. I wouldn’t have you change a bit. Don’t change.” I squeezed him until the tip of his nose almost touched mine.

His arms snaked around mine to mirror my embrace. “Some things in life will always be great mysteries, heart of my heart. But since I found you, I’ve learned more answers than stumbled upon riddles. I am most grateful for the light you shine in my darkness.”

Would Aisling and Johnson ever know the joy I’ve found with the hottest bad ass in the universe? Hopefully they would. That was the reward for serving humanity. But Goro wasn’t dark. Or am I renowned as taming the savage beast? Maybe I’m the one who crossed over into the darkness. Am I weak? Flawed? But I don’t mind. I hold the universe in my hand. Literally.

The End